Ichiban Ushiro no Daimaou Volume 8

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いちばんうしろの大魔王 ACT8

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目覚めた初代魔王ゼロと2Vは阿九斗を倒し、帝国中枢の掌握に成功する。魔法と教会の力を解体し、人造人間中心の世界を築き上げた2Vの真の目的とは何か？　一方、一命をとりとめた阿九斗は不二子の導きにより、けーな、淑恵と共に黒魔術師の村に逃げこむ。そして自らの出生の秘密を知る人物と出会った阿九斗が下した決断とは？

HOBBY JAPAN

いちばんうしろの大魔王

ACT8

「一番最初から語らなくてはなりません」
加寿子が口を開いた。

「魔王とは、人間であって、人間でないものです」

「ちぃ！」
2Vはマナ球を
身体の周囲に展開し、
これを操ろうと
手を動かした。

「おおおお！」

登場人物紹介

服部絢子（はっとりじゅんこ）

阿九斗に想いを寄せる一途で純情なクラス委員長。阿九斗の発言に動揺を隠しきれない。

江藤不二子（えとうふじこ）

阿九斗に忠誠を誓う黒魔術師にして薬物使い。魔獣ケルベロスに騎乗する。

紗伊阿九斗（さいあくと）

将来「魔王」になると（再び？）予言された「善良な」主人公。初代魔王ゼロの復活にどう出るのか？

曽我けーな（そが）

阿九斗に懐いている天然少女。お米が大好き。果たしてその正体は……？

三輪寛（みわひろし）

阿九斗の弟分を名乗るトラブルメイカー。勇者ブレイブという顔も持つ。

ころね

阿九斗の監視と護衛を行なう人造人間。しかしゼロと2Vによりコントロールを奪われてしまう。

木多淑恵（きたよしえ）

2Vに騙され、ゼロ復活の一因を作ってしまう。阿九斗のことを気に入り、その後は協力する。

リリィ白石（しらいし）

コンスタン魔術学院生徒会長。帽子がトレードマーク。喧嘩っ早く「小さい」と言われると切れてしまう。

2V（ツーブイ）

内閣魔術情報調査室、CIMO8の一人。ゼロを甦らせて、その力を操ることに成功する。

けいす

ゼロと共に仮想空間内にいた小柄な少女。ゼロに対する何らかのカギを握っているようだが？

Prologue

In this empire, the emperor had no power.

The emperor merely prayed for the imperial citizens while living in a splendid palace built within a forest in the center of the imperial capital.

Even so, the historical emperors had been loved by the people and the current empress, Kazuko, was especially adored. She maintained the beautiful appearance of an innocent young girl using special treatments and yet she had perfected her elegant behavior. She always smiled and wisdom could be felt in her every word.

Even if Kazuko had no political authority, she still held some sway. The imperial citizens would act if she spoke. For that reason, she was limited to speaking harmless things in public and her private life was carefully removed from the public eye.

As a result, Kazuko had several secrets. Some of them were trivial and others were quite major, but the largest of them was not even known by the generations of high

priests that had come and gone. The only ones who currently knew this secret were the highest ranking members of the imperial guards and a single girl.

The secret was that Kazuko had a twin sister. This twin was of course the girl who knew the secret.

The imperial family had a number of strange traditions . One of those dealt with the birth of twins. The right of succession was taken from the twin born first and she was instead raised in secret as a body double for her younger twin. Those serving the emperor had faithfully obeyed this custom and Kazuko's sister had been raised in a hidden part of the palace.

She was not given a name because she was to be a second Kazuko.

"If I'm Kazuko, then who is she?"

While hugging the doll she had been given as a toy, the girl had looked into a bright room of the palace. She had seen a girl who looked exactly like her. This other girl had been sitting before a toy-like desk and learning how to read and write from a teacher.

"She too is Kazuko-sama," was the reply the artificial human known as a L'Isle-Adam had given her.

"Why can't I talk to her?"

"Because that is the rule."

"Why can't I learn like she does?"

"You will soon learn the same things. However, that can be easily accomplished with a machine, so you do not need to work at it."

"Oh. So I have it easy. It must be tough being her."

The girl had smiled then, but she came to understand many different things as she grew up. She eventually realized just how unnatural a situation she was in.

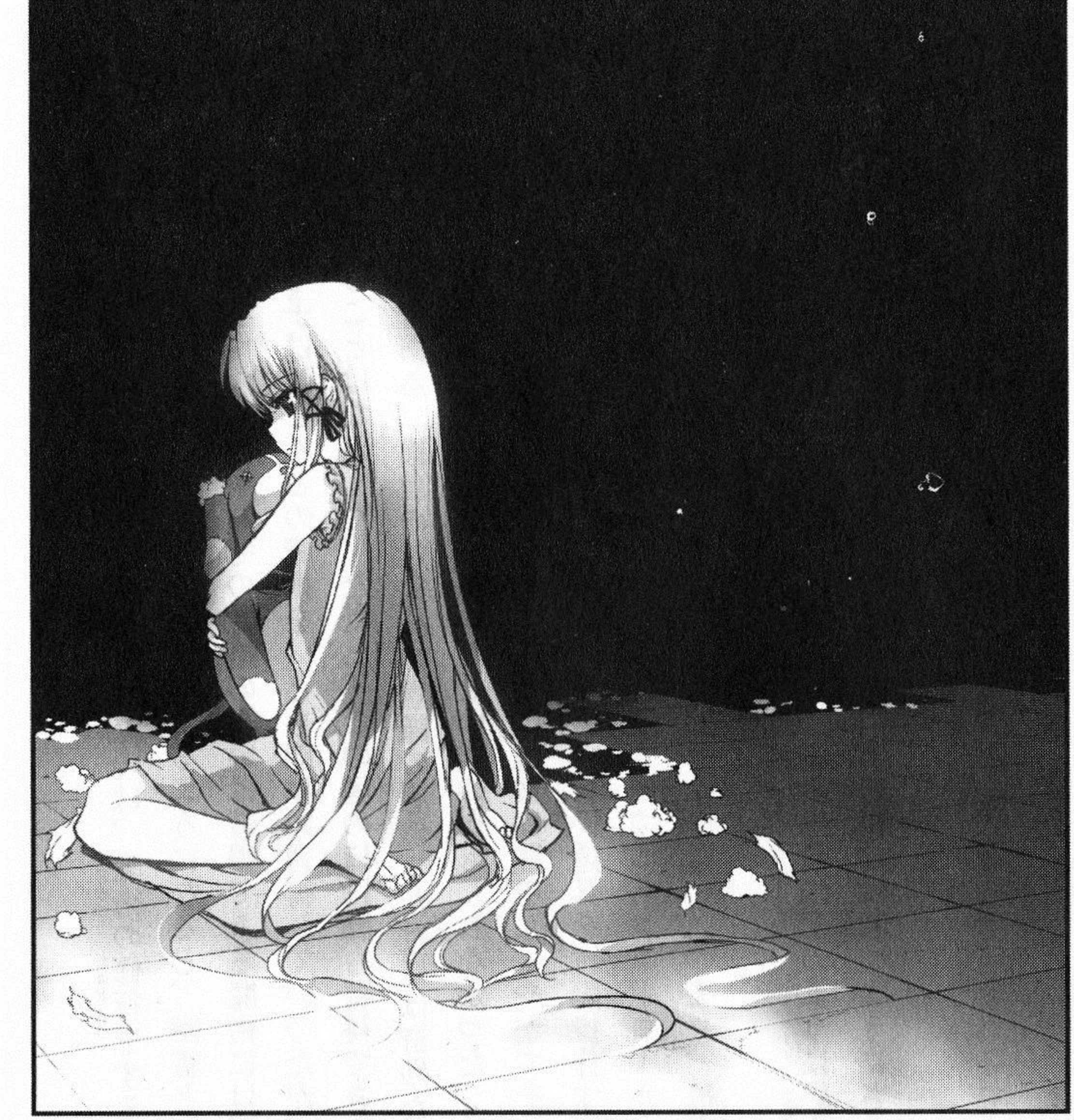
The girl would periodically have the memories of Kazuko the empress inserted into her head. She lived without ever doubting she was Kazuko, but the real Kazuko was a different girl who was only allowed to look on from afar. It was a bizarre feeling no one had ever experienced before.

The girl grew horribly confused over who she was.

She was also forbidden to interact with anyone except for a very small number of L'Isle-Adams. When she tried to leave the secret room that hid her from everyone else, those L'Isle-Adams would always find her and take her back.

The girl had never spoken with a human before, but Empress Kazuko interacted with many different people in the palace. Those memories were implanted into the girl, so she knew the rulers of the world and the high priests quite well. On the other hand, none of them knew she existed.

The girl had no one who could prove to her who she was. The L'Isle-Adams were no help at comforting her on that point. They were unable to answer the true question she was asking.



Even so, the girl could not go mad or commit suicide. She was forcibly given the greatest medical care available . Her mental stability was maintained with drugs and her body was almost entirely altered to give her the same extremely long lifespan as Kazuko.

That life continued for much too long and the girl eventually just stopped thinking about who she was.

She existed in the shadows where no one ever looked.

She was the opposite of Kazuko who lived in the light.

Instead of thinking logically about the issue, she chose to take in that perception of herself as a part of her body. Once she did, she ceased to view herself as human. She felt as if she were similar to a ghost.

She viewed the world from above as an invisible ghost no one could see. She simply observed the things around her while feeling removed from reality herself. She poured everything she observed into her head as data. That was the girl's everyday life.

However, her life reached a turning point when her magic training began. To match her physical growth,

Kazuko began training in magic. The girl who saw herself as a ghost also took this training, but a difference in personality produced a distinct difference between the magic they learned. Kazuko learned almost all magic with ease, but the girl showed little talent. However, she showed startling progress when learning the secret magic passed down by the imperial family. This magic allowed one to possess multiple objects with one's mind, so her ghost-like mindset may have aided her.

She grew obsessed at polishing her skills in this unique magic. Eventually, she learned that uniqueness held great power. She could remotely control normal tools and she could control a supposedly conscious L' Isle-Adam if it was one at a time.

Her guards were entirely made up of L'Isle-Adams, so she could now leave whenever she wished.

This realization was a pleasant surprise. She began to think about what would make an appropriate end for her life in that palace, but her joy vanished in only a few minutes.

She had realized she did not know what she would do.

She was no one and she was not even human, so she had not been given a proper role. And since she could become anyone she wanted by possessing dolls and L' Isle-Adams, it was already impossible for her to face another person with her true personality on the surface.

Her mindset had changed when she had viewed the outside world with a doll body and had discovered a strange man. There was no past data for this man. He too was "no one". Even so, he was oddly knowledgeable and had somehow managed to arrive at the top of the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office.

The girl had decided to contact him. Not because she was interested in his work but because she was interested in him.

The man went by the name Yamato Bouichirou.

The girl had honestly told him her circumstances and Bouichirou had earnestly replied.

On that day, the girl had decided to leave. She joined the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office and she moved from her hiding place in the palace to an apartment.

From that point on, she had her own name.

That name was 2V.

Chapter 1: A New God?

Soon after the students returned from the virtual alternate dimension, Constant Magic Academy was filled with chaos. Korone, the L'Isle-Adam supposedly sent as Sai Akuto's observer, had suddenly shot Akuto.

She had pulled a beam weapon from the bag she always carried with her. The narrow laser fired form it had been powerful enough to slice a human body in two, so she had obviously intended to kill him.

And Akuto had already been injured. He had been near death after the attack from Zero in the virtual alternate dimension where he could not use his recovery ability. Attacking him then was further proof that this was not one of Korone's bad jokes.

The students there stood in shock at the sudden turn of events. Everyone had noticed the change that had come over Korone, but it was also obvious the change went well beyond just Korone. Black smoke was rising from the distant city.

"It looks like all of the L'Isle-Adams in the city are out of control, too," muttered one student as he checked a news bulletin on his student handbook.

"Then…"

Everyone turned toward Korone. They slowly began moving away from her.

While still holding the beam weapon, Korone slowly walked through the path the students had made. She walked toward Akuto who lay collapsed on the ground. Soga Keena and Etou Fujiko who were pressed up against him looked surprised at Korone's approach.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"S-stop this, Korone-chan…"

But their words did not seem to get through to Korone. She continued forward with the barrel of her weapon turned toward Akuto.

"I cannot kill a human. Please move."

Keena was trying to cover Akuto with her own body which seemed to stop Korone from firing.

Fujiko's expression stiffened when she heard her words.

"It seems she has not gone completely out of control."

"Then is someone controlling her?" asked Keena.

However, no one there could give an answer.

Korone silently walked up to Fujiko and the others and stopped while staring down at them.

"H-hey. If you can talk, can you tell us why you're doing this?" asked Keena in a trembling voice.

Korone put the weapon away in her bag.

For an instant, Keena smiled.

"Th-thank goodness…"

But then Korone spoke.

"I am doing this so that I can eliminate the current demon king."

Keena was left speechless.

Korone then pulled a long stick-shaped object from her bag.

Fujiko's face stiffened in fear when she saw it. It was obviously a weapon used in close quarters combat. It was essentially a sword with a blunt rod in place of the blade.

"This is a stun stick. Anyone who resists can be non-lethally eliminated with this. I do not advise resisting."

Korone stroked the stun stick with her hand and an electric current ran through it.

"So I have to do this one way or another," muttered Fujiko as sweat flowed down her brow.

Fujiko had fought Korone in the virtual alternate dimension even if it had been a game, so Fujiko knew firsthand what kinds of superhuman movements Korone was capable of.

"We might be in trouble here…"

The situation was almost completely hopeless. None of the students outside of Fujiko and the others would even try to oppose Korone. The most reliable one of them in close quarters combat would be Hattori Junko, but Fujiko could see her standing still in utter shock.

"If we had some kind of opening, we might be able to manage something…"

Fujiko tried to search for an opening in Korone's movements, but Korone of course did not let her guard down as she walked.

"If you do not move, I will eliminate you."

Korone swung down the stun stick.

"No!"

Keena clung to Akuto's body. Fujiko closed her eyes, thinking it was all over.

But in that instant, a tremendous vibration filled the air.

"What is that?"

Noticing the oddity, Fujiko looked up.

Korone had stopped moving and she was vibrating.

"Ahhhhhhhhh…"

She had completely frozen in place while producing a voice similar to a broken recording device.

Fujiko had no idea what had caused this, but it was the opening she needed.

"Cerberus!" she called.

A demonic beast rushed toward the schoolyard. It was a giant dog monster with three heads. Ever since Fujiko had altered it so it would do what she said, she had grown quite fond of it.

As the beast ran over, it used one mouth to toss Akuto onto its back. Keena refused to let go of Akuto, so she was flung onto its back as well.

Fujiko climbed onto the Cerberus's back and noticed Junko had yet to come to her senses. Fujiko ordered the

beast to place Junko on its back as well before running from the courtyard where the other students were standing in shock.

"Hyah!"

Junko finally regained her senses when the giant dog used its mouth to toss her onto its back. She turned to Fujiko and asked a question.

"Senpai, what do we do now?"

"We can only run away. We need to know more about the situation. All I can say for now is that Korone has probably gone nuts due to that 'original demon king' that attacked in the virtual alternate dimension."

Fujiko had the Cerberus run away from Korone.

"H-hey, where are we going? No matter how strong A-chan is, he still needs time to recover," said Keena worriedly.

"We have no choice. Now that this has happened, I have to bring him to the hidden village of the black magicians."

Fujiko may have sounded reluctant, but she had intended to do this eventually.

“Hidden village?” repeated Keena in surprise.

“Yes. It is the home of the black magicians I have secretly been in contact with. It is out in the country a bit, but that makes it easier to hide.”

“Senpai, you make it sound like you accept that he is the demon king,” protested Junko.

“Of course I do,” said Fujiko as if doing anything else was foolish.

Junko looked confused.

“But that is not what is best for him.”

“This is not the time for that. If all of the country’s L’ Isle-Adams are being controlled, then the entire country will be taken over.”

It appeared Junko could not come up with anything to say in response.

"The only ones who can oppose that are the black magicians who have rebelled against the country," added Fujiko with a grin. She then looked behind the Cerberus. "Also, it seems we do not have time to discuss it."

Korone had recovered and she was smoothly pursuing them.

"Kh… But either way, I can hardly go to a village of black magicians," said Junko reluctantly.

She looked back and forth between Akuto's unconscious face and the scene behind them. But after looking at Akuto a few times, a sorrowful look filled her face. Having made up her mind, she jumped down from the Cerberus's back.

"I will stop Korone!"

"If you get separated now, I will not tell you were the hidden village is!" cried Fujiko as Junko grew more distant.

But Junko did not turn back.

"Please hurry up and leave!"

Junko held up her sword.

Korone smoothly approached her.

“Yah!”

With a short cry, Junko went on the attack.

But in no time at all, Korone’s stun stick jabbed into Junko’s gut. The sharp sound of electricity rang out.

“Gh!”

Junko let out a short groan and passed out.

Korone’s merciless attack caused Keena to cry out in surprise from the Cerberus’s back.

“No matter how serious she was, the normal Korone-chan would make a joke here!”

Even as she instantly took out Junko, Korone gave no dry comment and instead continued pursuing the Cerberus.

She moved faster than the Cerberus could run, so she quickly caught up.

"I will make sure I can resist you at least some this time!"

Fujiko swung her hand to use magic.

However, she stopped in confusion.

She could not focus mana in that hand.

"What!? My magic…"

"You can't use it?" cried Keena in surprise.

"Has this situation affected the gods too?" speculated Fujiko just as Korone jumped up.

She dropped toward them from the air with the stun stick held out.

"In that case…!"

Fujiko decided to use the code for the black magic that was not controlled by the gods. She focused on activating it, but Korone's attack was too quick.

"I won't make it in time!"

Fujiko's eyes opened wide with fear, but the same phenomenon from before came over Korone.

Her body began vibrating and she dropped from the air as if she had fallen unconscious.

"Again? I'm not about to complain, but what is that?"

As Fujiko spoke her question aloud, the Cerberus suddenly slowed its pace.

"What is it?"

Fujiko looked forward and Keena pointed ahead of them.

"There's someone there."

A single girl stood atop a hill away from the academy in the direction the Cerberus was headed. She held something box-shaped in her hands.

"Who is that?"

Fujiko prepared herself for an attack, but the girl waved her hand as if she recognized Fujiko and the others.

"You're Etou Fujiko-san, right? If you're going to flee, can you take me with you? I'll explain the situation later, " said the girl sociably.

Fujiko was of course suspicious, but her mouth opened in shock when she heard what the girl, Kita Yoshie, said next.

"I'm sure you find this surprising, but we've met before. I was Yoshihiko in the virtual alternate dimension ."

"So that's it."

Fujiko nodded in understanding and let Yoshie on the Cerberus. She then turned to the box-shaped object the girl held. It had something like an antenna attached with a cord and Yoshie turned it toward Korone.

"This is an attachment for the virtual alternate dimension creator I made. When the device activates, it creates a barrier by vibrating the mana in the air, so I can use this to give that barrier directionality," explained Yoshie.

"In other words, you can vibrate the mana in the direction the antenna is pointed to keep someone from moving?"

Yoshie nodded.

"Exactly. It seems the gods aren't giving permission to use magic, but machines like this can still manage. This is all I can rely on. However, I can only use it in short bursts or it will overheat, so it'll only buy us some time," complained Yoshie.

"Not to worry," said Fujiko with a smile. "I will make sure we escape in the opening that creates. And even without that machine, I can use magic unconnected to the gods. I can use black magic."

"Fwoh! That's great. Please do."

Yoshie clapped her hands together and Fujiko grinned.

"You make it sound easy. It is actually quite difficult. …Bring the darkness of my heart into the world!"

While Fujiko chanted those words to focus her mind, a dark aura surrounded her body.

No, it only looked like an aura. It was actually black mana. The surrounding mana was being used to distort the light and cut off one's vision.

That dark curtain of mana spread out and covered the area about 100 meters around them.

"We can use this chance to hide in the mountains behind the school," said Fujiko in a satisfied tone.

"Amazing. I'm really impressed," cheered Yoshie.

Fujiko looked at her and shrugged.

"Your personality is a lot different than it was in the virtual alternate dimension."

"Oh, that was roleplaying. I was just trying to act like the guys in otome games."

"Otome games? You mean those games where beautiful boys tease the player?"

"Oh? Do you play them?"

"No, I do not. But I suppose you would be that kind of person if you created that game. …Wait, that does not matter. Can you explain the situation?" asked Fujiko.

As Fujiko and the others began their flight, a single land car was driving through the center of the imperial capital. After escaping Lily Shiraishi's attack, 2V had arranged for another CIMO 8 member to pick her up.

The man in the driver's seat let out a falsetto cry of surprise.

"Twins!?"

He was a quiet-looking middle-aged man. He wore glasses and the lab coat of a researcher. From his appearance, one would assume not much would elicit such an exaggerated reaction from him, but what he had just been told was one of those few things.

"Yes. I am Kazuko's twin," said 2V with a grin.

She looked like a sickly skinny girl, but if that was true , she would have to be quite old. However, it did not

seem she was lying or that she had gone insane. If 2V's face had held any color at all and she was brought up to a healthy weight, she would look exactly like Empress Kazuko.

The man in the driver's seat, Kento, had interacted with 2V in the past, but this was the first time he had seen her true face.

"Does no one know about this?"

"No one but the parties concerned. Oh, and the head of the imperial guard might know. I wanted to make sure I never returned to the palace. Almost no one knew in the first place, but I made sure to erase the memory from the doctors' minds. It was a real pain," said 2V as if it barely concerned her.

"Was it done so the twins wouldn't fight over succession?"

"No. This seems to be the tradition. One of the twins is raised as a body double. That's just how the imperial family does things. I was trained for that role and gained the abilities I have now. Until the day I was scouted by CIMO 8's currently missing leader and fled the palace, I lived for the sake of this empire. Ah ha ha…"

2V laughed loudly.

"Is that why you resurrected Zero, the first demon king?" asked Kento in disgust as he looked out the window.

The cityscape visible there was still in the middle of a disaster. Smoke rose here and there between the buildings, flying cars had crashed to the ground, and land cars had run off the roads.

That was what happened when every single L' Isle-Adam temporarily malfunctioned. In the modern day, everything from driving to manual labor was almost entirely handled by L'Isle-Adams. Kento could not even imagine how many small accidents had occurred in factories and the like.

"Zero can control all L'Isle-Adams, so he's the perfect partner for me. This chaos is only temporary. I've already regained control, so these disasters will not spread any further."

"So you had me prepare that vessel for Zero in order to end this chaos. I'm going to ask you again: what exactly is Zero?"

"The very first L'Isle-Adam and the very first demon king. However, he was more an artificial intelligence than an artificial human. He was created to manage mankind."

"…So he came before the gods," muttered Kento.

In the sense that he was an artificial intelligence created to manage mankind, he was the same as the current gods.

"Zero was meant to maximize mankind's happiness, but for some reason, he concluded wiping out humanity would best achieve that goal."

"Why?"

"I can give him an interview now, so maybe I'll ask him later. I'm going to be busy for a while though, so it will have to wait. At any rate, Zero's problems were fixed and the gods were quickly made. That led to the very first demon king war."

"So that's how the demon king and gods fought for the first time."

"It was actually a fight between L'Isle-Adams and human magic. The fight was on a fairly small scale, but Zero was ultimately sealed."

"Why didn't they destroy him?"

"That's the thing. To put it simply, Zero is the supporting pillar of their thoughts. If they lose Zero, they will likely no longer be able to exist."

"So it all starts with Zero, is that it?"

"He is also the first L'Isle-Adam, so Zero really is the foundation of our current society. Still, a tool is nothing more than a tool. That's why I can control him. That makes me the strongest existence in the world right now. Oh, sorry. I suppose we usually think of 'strongest' as referring to CIMO 8's Codename USD."

2V's face twisted in a smile.

Kento was the Codename USD in question. However, Kento showed no sign of feeling any emotion over those words. He merely adjusted the position of his glasses and spoke.

"In other words, you are starting a rebellion."

"No, I am taking on a new identity. From now on, I will be Kazuko. I think I'll see what it's like ruling as empress."

Kento glanced over at 2V. A look similar to killer intent could be seen behind his glasses.

"I know you are not the obsessively ambitious type, so why are you doing this?"

2V returned his look with the eyes of a lifeless girl. Only the very corner of her mouth turned up in a grin.

"If I gave a boring answer here, you would become my enemy, wouldn't you? But you know you'll enjoy what I'm doing here. I want to prove that everyone but me is crazy. A lovely experiment, don't you think?"

A truly rational smile covered the face of that girl with sunken cheeks. That combined with her lifeless eyes, would have made anyone think she was the crazy one. However, that expression and her words were actually both calculated and restrained.

Kento opened his mouth a bit and then closed it. That was how much this had surprised him.

"Everyone but you?"

"Yes. Everyone in the world. Once I become empress, I will make them all go crazy with just a few words. However, I believe that this will actually save the world. How about we tear away all the false civility? I want to show them just how much they all desire chaos and violence."

2V laughed.

"I see. I can't help you with that, but I will watch you. If you can pull it off on such a large scale, then do it. I look forward to seeing if you prevail or if some sane person prevails," said Kento as he stopped the car.

2V opened the door to find the park entrance to the palace. She got out and a great number of L'Isle-Adams lined up. They all worked in the palace. Some were male, some were female, and they were all dressed as official servants. They greeted their new master, 2V, in an orderly fashion.

The splendid palace in that nature-filled area at the center of the city was now 2V's.

"Did you capture Empress Kazuko?" 2V asked a nearby L'Isle-Adam.

"No, Her Majesty was absent," replied the L' Isle-Adam.

"Do you mean she ran away?"

"Yes, but she is alone. All the others in the palace have been restrained."

"I see. When I enter the palace, they might think the empress has returned. Well, even if they find it suspicious, they'll have no choice but to treat me as the real one in this situation."

With a mocking laugh, 2V looked up at the top of the palace.

A strange sight could be seen there.

An object was floating there. It was almost a sphere, but it had exactly 20 edges that formed corners. Its diameter was twenty meters long. It looked halfway

between being transparent and silver, but its slimy-looking metallic surface reflected the surrounding scenery and emitted too much light to look directly at it.

That was Zero's body.

"So that holds a god's body within a virtual alternate dimension. You sure made a luxurious home for him."

2V turned toward the car and waved.

Kento lightly raised his hand in response and drove off .

2V walked alongside the row of L'Isle-Adams and looked back up at Zero.

She was currently controlling Zero. That was possible because of the imperial family's magic that she had been taught. The single type of magic she was able to use had given her this absolute power.

And 2V gave a loud order to Zero without speaking.

Suddenly, a giant image appeared in the air above the splendid palace. It was an image of Kazuko.

Of course, it was not the real Kazuko. It was an image produced by Zero. However, it looked and sounded exactly the same as the real one. This Kazuko spoke the words 2V spoke.

"I am saddened by the recent accidents," began Kazuko.

The image was being transmitted all across the empire.

2V began by honestly announcing that the chaos had been caused by Zero. She explained what Zero was and what his ability was. She then worked to convince the people that they should not oppose Zero.

The gods had ceased to function. That meant the people could not use magic. On top of that, all of the L' Isle-Adams were under Zero's control. She told them they should do what he says.

Essentially, she was announcing the empress's surrender.

Once the surrender was complete, 2V had her words transmitted in Zero's voice. An inhuman and frightening male voice reverberated throughout the empire.

"The gods are dead. But that is not a problem. Cast aside your magic. I will use the L'Isle-Adams to serve all of you. And in so doing, I shall rule over an empire of eternal happiness. I am the new god."

Zero (aka 2V) finished the announcement.

2V gave a loud laugh and passed through the palace gate.

In that moment, the empire fell under 2V's control.

One week had passed since the sudden change to the empire. There had of course been great chaos in that time , but the people had quickly grown used to their life without magic.

All public services were carried out by L'Isle-Adams. The churches where the gods were worshiped were done away with and the priests lost their jobs. The knights were redistributed underneath L'Isle-Adam bosses and they acted on the orders of those bosses. Almost every corporation was placed under the management of L' Isle-Adams. There was of course massive unemployment .

However, losing one's job did not lead to hardship. Almost all of the production needed to keep society running was carried out by L'Isle-Adams, so people no longer had to labor. Everyone gained a decent income without doing anything.

—I would never have guessed this would feel so empty.

Junko absentmindedly thought while sitting in one corner of a classroom.

Constant Magic Academy was gone. The students who still wanted to attend school had been transferred to normal schools. Most of the students had chosen to continue their schooling, but they had been distributed to different schools in order to keep them from forming too large a group.

Junko was now living a normal life among unfamiliar students.

—Normal?

She questioned the term she herself had used. It did seem this had been normal long ago. One attended classes with no real objective in mind and memorized only the knowledge needed to not obstruct society in the future. However, she was mostly being forced to gain the patience to obediently sit still during class. Being obedient was what mattered most. In the society that had

arrived a week earlier, a mistake could lead to the L' Isle-Adams no longer bringing you food. Simply "not thinking" had become a lot more important.

However, none of the students around her had chosen to study magic in the past. Some of them even welcomed this society.

"I bought the guitar Myou-chan used on TV yesterday."

"You moron. You shouldn't let her influence you so much."

"What's wrong with it? I'll be popular if I learn how to play it."

"The L'Isle-Adams can play any song more accurately, so what's the point?"

"Don't forget about emotion. I just have to learn how to make girls cry with my guitar."

Junko could hear the boys talking during the break. They realized that the only "human" activities left were

the arts and self-expression, but she could not believe they would waste their efforts on trying to be popular. Of course, those boys would not agree with her at all.

—This will just repeat without end from here on… Anyone can tell that.

Once they graduated, they would not need to work. They would live a life of alcohol, food, and romance. She could not currently contact them, but her parents had been stopped from reconstructing the temple of Suhara and were currently in a state of pseudo house arrest. Junko herself had begun a life of going back and forth between her dorm and school with no real purpose.

"You look sad. How about we go eat parfaits after school?" asked Korone.

She spoke so brightly one almost forgot how she used to ask. She actually had an expression on her face, she did not wear her uniform properly, and she acted like any normal girl.

"No, thanks," replied Junko with a stiff expression.

She still could not get over how wrong it all felt. Korone was now a popular member of the class and she helped create the class's bright and cheerful mood.

"You'll never be popular like that. You're wasting that cute face of yours," said Korone jokingly.

Junko had repeatedly asked Korone to return to her old personality, but it was no use. Junko was now the weird one in the class.

"I promised to meet my little sister today. But that does not matter. How about you return to how you used to be?"

"How I used to be? I've always been like this. And if you keep saying these weird things, you might get arrested. I hear there are a lot of people getting arrested for antigovernment activities."

Korone then dashed back over to her friends. Junko did not overlook the strangely eerie look in her eyes as she left.

There were indeed rumors of people opposing the L' Isle-Adams' control. Junko had even seen posts on the

internet recruiting likeminded people. However, those had disappeared in less than a day.

—*This might be a really bad situation.*

Junko felt a vague unease.

After school, she headed to where she had promised to meet her sister Yuuko. She walked toward the clock at a street corner near her school.

Yuuko worked in the entertainment industry as an idol, so she was well-known. She was currently wearing a hat to disguise herself somewhat, but Junko was more surprised by the person standing next to her.

"Hiroshi!" cried Junko in surprise.

Miwa Hiroshi raised a hand in greeting with an uncomfortable look on his face.

"Hey. For some reason, it's kind of embarrassing seeing you again now."

"You were not around during that commotion. Where have you been?"

"He transferred to my school," explained Yuuko in his place.

Yuuko looked delighted.

—*Come to think of it, they did get along oddly well.*

Junko felt an odd sense of understanding as she looked at the two of them together.

"Fine, but wouldn't it be bad if someone saw you with him?" said Junko in a slightly teasing tone.

Yuuko laughed, but Hiroshi grew terribly flustered.

"P-please give me a break, class rep."

"Ah ha ha ha. Hiroshi-kun, it's fine, so don't worry about it. I don't mind at all."

"You should mind at least some," said Junko.

"Th-that's right. You're famous."

Hiroshi still looked nervous.

"No, it's not a problem. The industry has gotten a little weird recently," pouted Yuuko.

"Really?"

"Yeah. There's some kind of pressure or something. I'm not sure how to put it, but it isn't fun. What I say is decided ahead of time, there's more and more I'm not allowed to sing, and I can't choose anything for myself."

As Yuuko began to complain, Hiroshi frantically pushed at the two sisters' backs.

"C-c'mon, let's go to a café. We shouldn't just stand around and talk."

They entered a random café and Junko and Yuuko got to the reason they were meeting: they had wanted to discuss their parents.

"So are father and the others okay?"

Junko could not help but lower her voice.

"Yeah. Nothing's happened to them, but it looks like we can't meet them directly any time soon. Also…"

At that point, their tea arrived and Yuuko stopped talking. The waitress was of course a L'Isle-Adam and Junko did not like how she glanced over at their faces. Junko may have just been overly sensitive, but it still bugged her.

"How far do you have to go, I wonder?" muttered Junko.

"How far?" asked Yuuko.

"How much do you have to say or do before you get arrested like in the rumors?" clarified Junko.

Hiroshi's expression grew serious, but Yuuko laughed lightly.

"Ah ha ha. Don't worry. Dad and the others are fine. Nothing's going to happen."

"R-right…"

Despite what Junko said, something about it all bothered her.

Only a week had passed, but an unpleasant aura had spread throughout the city. The people who had never

used magic in their everyday lives may not have noticed as much, but a lack of freedom and an oppressiveness had definitely increased.

But what bothered her even more was how most people seemed to have no problem with it. It was the same with Yuuko. Even though their parents had been confined to their home, she was acting like it was no big deal.

"But we have definitely lost our freedom. When something is taken from you, isn't it wrong to expect benevolence from those who took it from you?" asked Junko.

Hiroshi quickly cut in.

"C-c'mon, you could also say we have more freedom now, don't you think? After all, the restrictions from the gods are gone, so we can do whatever we want. And you could say the ability to use magic was too great a responsibility for us. Also, we can get perfect scores at these normal schools without even trying. That makes school a place to just have fun with your friends," said Hiroshi with a stiff smile.

"But shouldn't we always try to improve ourselves? And given our position, Yuuko and I may be in danger, so…"

Junko tried to dig in her heels, but Hiroshi shook his hands to cut her off.

"No, no. You aren't in danger at all."

Yuuko took Hiroshi's side.

"It'll be fine. And if anything does happen, Hiroshi-kun will protect me."

Yuuko clung to Hiroshi's arm and he shook his head while blushing.

"No, no. I have no power, so please don't do anything dangerous."

Junko felt a bit of self-loathing when she realized she found that scene somewhat irritating rather than charming.

—*It has only been a week.*

Only a week had passed, but that commotion felt like the distant past. While amid that chaos, she had wanted the danger and her exploding emotions to pass as quickly as possible, but she now looked back on them with sweet feelings of nostalgia.

—All of that came from him.

She thought about Akuto.

She felt she might forever regret not running away with him. If she never met him again, she certainly would.

—But he never felt that way about me…

She was aware just how much of a shock it had been to her when he had suggested she spend time with Yoshihiko. She did not want to admit it, but that had been why she had jumped down from that Cerberus's back.

—Shouldn't I have done everything I could to stay with him ?

As she thought about that, she held her head in her hands and groaned.

"Are you okay?"

Yuuko's question brought her back to her senses.

"Y-yes. It is nothing. I just think you should be more cautious."

Junko cleared her throat and shook her head.

"C'mon, I know that. Just try to keep in touch." Yuuko drank the rest of her tea and turned toward Hiroshi. " You're free after this, right? There's somewhere I want to go with you."

"F-fine. As long as we don't stay out too late."

"What? We're not little kids. Your school doesn't have a dorm, so you live alone in an apartment, right?"

"Y-yeah, but I have something I need to do today…"

"Okay. We just can't stay out too late today, right?"

Hiroshi and Yuuko had already begun their own conversation. Junko wanted to leave, so she stood up, causing her chair to scrape against the floor.

"How about we leave?"

"Okay. If you need something, just tell me. Make sure to watch the shows I'm on, okay?" said Yuuko.

After parting ways with Yuuko who looked delighted and Hiroshi who looked troubled, Junko returned to her dorm room and sat in that room which had nothing but the essentials.

The only entertainment came from internet broadcasts. She could communicate with others using online messages, but Junko only felt any affinity with those who used to use magic. And any political conversation would quickly be suppressed.

As she stared blankly at a news show without really watching it, she was overcome by a feeling of gradually going insane. The news was clearly more monotonous than it used to be. Criminal incidents were not reported, so the news only talked about food, sports, and other recreational activities. It was possible there really were no criminal incidents to report. Some L'Isle-Adams were not made beautiful and were truly impossible to distinguish from a human. Junko had heard those ones would prevent crimes before they were committed or

arrest the criminal immediately after they were committed. If that was true, it meant people were being monitored at all times.

—I feel like I am going to go crazy being constantly watched like this.

Junko turned off the news, but then she could not bear sitting in that silent room.

—I just want to tell someone what I honestly feel.

She wondered if this was what it meant to long for human companionship, but when it came down to it, it was Akuto she wanted to talk with.

—I really do regret not going with him, don't I?

Just as Fujiko had said when they had parted ways, she might never see them again.

As she sat silently thinking that, she felt an odd itching feeling on her face. She reached up and her finger came back wet.

—I am crying… I did not even notice…

No one was watching, but she was overcome with an intense feeling of embarrassment.

—Did I care about him that much?

At the same time, a feeling of shame lurked deep within her chest.

—I should have just been honest. Why couldn't I do that? I always try and fail on my own.

Junko looked up so as not to cry any more.

—Is it all over already?

Hiroshi had transferred to a school without a dormitory, so he lived in an apartment. However, when he returned home a bit late in the evening because of his time with Yuuko, he found a girl sharply glaring at him in his room.

She was short and a bit boyish, but her expression was that of someone used to ordering others around. She sent a stream of abusive language toward Hiroshi the second he returned.

"You're late. I was beginning to think something happened. You need to be more careful."

She was former student council president Lily Shiraishi.

After 2V had escaped from them, Hiroshi had used his power to repel the attacking dolls, but they had been forced to flee and hide because Zero had control of the gods and had taken the empress hostage. Fortunately, it remained a secret that the suit Hiroshi had been given by Yamato Bouichirou had regained its power. The suit's mana canceller had cut off the information the dolls had been sending to Zero. Lily had ended up hiding in Hiroshi's apartment.

"I can't help it. I do have a life, you know?" complained Hiroshi.

He closed the door, turned on the lights, and then froze in place.

Lily was in nothing but her underwear and sitting cross-legged on the floor. This was simply too immodest, so Hiroshi frantically looked away.

"Wait, president. You can't dress like that…"

"Stop sexualizing everything, you idiot. I'm just washing my clothes," complained Lily.

She did not seem to think of Hiroshi as a guy because she showed no sign of embarrassment.

"In that case, wear my clothes."

"I can't wear your clothes. They lack the proper beauty ."

"And being half-naked is beautiful?"

"If you can't think of your own body as beautiful, it means you haven't trained it enough."

Hiroshi glanced over at Lily and tilted his head.

"Well, you aren't fat, but you aren't exactly feminine either…"

A dangerous light filled Lily's eyes when she heard that.

She stuck her right hand out while sitting on the floor. After a moment, she realized something and stood up.

"Damn. I still try to use magic without thinking."

Lily walked over to Hiroshi, stretched her back up as straight as she could, and grabbed his face with her right hand.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow…"

"Oh, shut up. There's a body type you're born with and it's hard to get away from it."

"I get it. I get it."

"Honestly. I wouldn't have chosen this combination either. If I have to share a room with a guy, I'd prefer one who's a little manlier," complained Lily as she walked away from Hiroshi.

"Like aniki?" asked Hiroshi as he rubbed his face.

He was of course referring to Akuto.

One of Lily's cheeks rose in a grin.

"Hmph. Being in that kind of situation with someone I want to kill one of these days might not be so bad."

Lily could say some surprisingly adult things given her size.

Hiroshi was unsure how to respond, so Lily changed the subject.

"Anyway, you're the only one I can rely on right now, so you need to be more of a man."

Hiroshi's face stiffened.

"I know that. We can't use magic, so my suit is the only way to fight, right?"

"Exactly. And you're the only one I can use to contact people, too. I can't leave this room, after all," said Lily as she held a handheld computer out toward Hiroshi. "Any progress on 2V's identity?"

Hiroshi transferred data from his student handbook and into the computer.

"There's only so much I can investigate, but I did secretly get some data from someone working for your

dad. It seems the empress's declaration of surrender wasn't Kazuko-sama. It was a synthesized video."

"I guess the rumors that the empress's face has changed a bit are true. That's definitely a healthier-looking 2V," said Lily in a tone that said she still could not believe it.

"But even if 2V had Zero's power, she would need a blood relation to the empress to take over the palace so easily. And it would all make a lot more sense that way," said Hiroshi.

Lily folded her arms.

"True. But in that case, I can't explain how she has handled things afterwards. If I were 2V, I would kill Kazuko and kill us, but that hasn't happened yet."

"Yes. I thought we would run into trouble sooner. Kazuko-sama might have been killed already, but if so, she should be working even harder to find you since you 've seen her face."

"All she's doing is crushing any antigovernment activities and the black magicians. That would mean 2V is targeting Akuto."

"I don't get it," said Hiroshi as he thought.

"But it's convenient for us. Whatever the problem is, we just have to kill 2V to resolve it. That leaves you as our trump card. I'll put together a plan to attack the palace with the former priests, so you help me contact them."

Lily patted Hiroshi's shoulder.

He shrugged with a troubled expression.

"You just want to kill 2V. You could act cuter, you know?" complained Hiroshi.

Lily gave a smile that was hardly cute. It would have made a veteran warrior tremble in fear.

"I can be cute when I need to, but our school was shut down and my L'Isle-Adam officer Arnoul is being controlled. This is no time to be sitting around acting so foolishly."

Hiroshi took a step back.

"O-okay, I won't ask you to be cute, but could you at least not be so openly hostile to the person letting you use his room?"

"Shut up. If I did that, you'd sneak into my bed at night," declared Lily.

"President, you use most of my blankets at night, so I want to sneak into your bed for another reason… It's starting to get cold," complained Hiroshi.

"Fine. You can have one summer blanket. If you fold it over three times and wrap it around your stomach, it'll keep you warm," said Lily with odd confidence.

"Even if I didn't have any feelings for the girl, I thought living with one would be better than this…"

Hiroshi grew depressed, but Lily showed no sign of caring.

"Shut up, you idiot. If you aren't going to make dinner , go buy something at the convenience store. But don't buy two bentos. That would give away that you're feeding someone else."

Chapter 2: The Conquered Empire

"The mountains are fun. I thought I would hate the outdoors, but it fits surprisingly well with my otaku interests if I think of it like an RPG," said Yoshie in delight.

"Yeah, it is a lot like a game. You gather equipment, use it at the appropriate times, and sometimes alter or combine objects you picked up to make what you need," said Keena casually.

"The two of you should be taking this more seriously," complained Fujiko.

Two days had passed since they had entered the mountains. They were travelling by Cerberus and by foot to the black magician village Fujiko knew of, so it would take them three days to cross the mountains.

The L'Isle-Adam guards had not yet been fully in place, so they had been able to buy the camping goods and other equipment they needed. Fujiko had then used the advantage of black magic to erase all trace of their presence.

They had plenty of time to talk, so Yoshie had explained the situation to Fujiko.

However, they still did not know the secret behind Zero even after exchanging information. They had seen Kazuko's surrender while on the run, but that was all they knew. They had too little information. Also, other than 2V, they were likely the only ones concerned about Keisu's whereabouts.

"That L'Isle-Adam named Keisu is probably the key to all this."

"Are you saying that short L'Isle-Adam we met in the virtual alternate dimension is the only one who can seal Zero?"

"Yes. Zero should be concerned about her, too."

"In that case, he will be searching for Keisu while also pursuing us."

"We need to find her before Zero, but who knows where she is."

"Yes, she entered the virtual alternate dimension a long time ago. Who can say where she would have materialized."

As they spoke, they continued their escape. Their goals were to get Akuto healed and to locate Keisu.

Akuto was still unconscious. His wounds were enough to kill any normal person and he was not doing his best, so his recovery would never get anywhere if he was not allowed to rest somewhere.

"But why did Zero try to kill Akuto-sama? If Zero is the first demon king, then I have no idea what the demon king even is anymore," said Fujiko with a tilt of her head.

"We might be looking at only the worst parts of human history, so I don't really want to think about it. If what you all told me is true, the demon king is supposed give temporary death to mankind in order to allow mankind to advance, right? It sounds like something from a legend," said Yoshie lightly.

Fujiko was gradually coming to understand that Yoshie had the personality of a cheerful mad scientist. Of course, that could also be called being an otaku.

"But Zero seems to be doing the opposite. Akuto-sama was trying to break free from destiny and head down his own path, though, so don't worry," said Fujiko.

Yoshie's eyes sparkled.

"Fwohh! That's great! Where there's a will, there's a way, is that it? He's called the demon king, but he's trying to save mankind? Ohh! You mean he worries about things like, 'Calm down, my demon king blood!'? That's so exciting."

Yoshie's carefree comment brought a weary look to Fujiko's face.

"U-um, try not to get so lost in your own world…"

Yoshie scratched her head embarrassedly.

"Yeah, I guess I am a bit obsessed with that kind of thing. Hey, I want to give our group a name. How about the Maidens of the Freezing Flame? I think its sounds great," said Yoshie in all seriousness.

Fujiko was shocked.

—H-her tastes never developed past middle school!

"I think the freezing flame does a good job of capturing the contradiction of a demon king being a savior. And you're the cool beauty type while Keena-kun has red hair."

Yoshie was in a good mood, but Fujiko held her head in her hands.

However, Keena joined in.

"I like it! That's what we were missing!"

"N-no, we were not missing that. We were not missing that at all. A-anyway, we should arrive early tomorrow, so we need to get some rest today," said Fujiko.

However, Yoshie and Keena continued their excited conversation for some time.

Fujiko somehow managed to get to sleep, but the conversation surrounding her brought some odd terms into her dream.

—Uuh… Scorching instincts, sacrifice of gravity, solitary gale, insane archangel, eternal moonlight…

She felt a premonition of coming troubles, but they arrived at the village the next day. The villagers recognized Fujiko and gladly welcomed them. Then again, the warm welcome may have had more to do with the villagers seeing Akuto.

"I never thought I would have a chance to see the great demon king for myself," said the villagers.

It was a small village filled mostly with farmers, so it was definitely an isolated rural area. However, the ages of the residents were all over the place. That helped drive home that this was a village of black magicians. If it was simply a depopulated village, no one from the younger generations would remain. This was a community centered on a common faith.

Fujiko and the others were to stay in the village head's house. They were given a futon to let Akuto rest in, they were served tea and snacks, and they were generally made to feel at home.

The village head was a gentle, middle-aged man. He had a wife, a small child, and a large Japanese-style house.

"This has gotten quite serious," he said while showing them a news broadcast.

The news showed no chaos of any kind in the cities. The lack of anything either meant the information was being suppressed or society was being completely controlled.

"This is the death of freedom," muttered Fujiko with a serious expression.

The village head nodded.

"As a group dedicated to releasing the conditions on magic, this is hard to forgive. Society has regressed."

"Akuto-sama is likely our only hope, but we lack the knowledge to know what to do once he has recovered. Would you be willing to lend us your wisdom?" asked Fujiko.

The village head thought for a bit and shook his head as if to say that would be difficult.

"I know a fair bit about the history of black magicians, but not even I have heard of this first demon king that has sealed off the gods."

"Then what is different between this demon king and the other demon kings like Akuto-sama?"

"I do not know. I thought you would know, Etou-kun."

"Me?"

"Everyone here thought you knew everything about the demon king."

"No… No one knows the details. All I know is the relationship between the gods and the demon king."

Fujiko felt discouraged. At this rate, they would be forced to continue their flight while knowing nothing.

"I am sorry I could not be of more help, but I thought the demon king would have returned to the place of his birth by this point."

Fujiko raised her head.

"Eh? The place of his birth? What do you mean?"

The village head's eyebrows rose in confusion.

"It's a well-known legend. The demon king is said to have fled from the place of his birth and hid among normal children as an orphan. It is said he received various revelations while at the place of his birth."

"But Akuto-sama said he does not know where he was born."

"That is a problem because no one else does either. If only you had some clue…"

"I will search for one. I can ask Akuto-sama once he wakes up."

"Yes. Try to keep it slow. Magic is used to hide us from various sensors here and false records of the residents' lives are sent to the gods, so you are safe here."

"Thank you very much."

Fujiko gave a bow.

The village head ended the conversation there and suggested the girls take a bath. They were filthy after travelling and camping in the mountains, so they were

glad to do so. The village head's wife brought them towels and they started toward the bath, but Yoshie suddenly stopped.

"Wait, I want to wipe down Akuto-kun's body before we take our bath."

The village head's wife apologized for not thinking of it and prepared another towel and a tub filled with warm water.

"Oh, but are you three going to do it? Should I call in another guy?"

"I can handle it," replied Yoshie, but Fujiko gave an even louder reply.

"Leave it to me. I always serve by Akuto-sama's side."

That was enough for the woman, but Yoshie gave a sidelong glance toward Fujiko.

"Eh? I've never seen you serve by his side."

"Hmph. I do not want to hear that from someone that does now know about the great bond between us."

Fujiko glared back and Yoshie cleared her throat.

"Well, whatever. It was my idea, so I can wipe down his body, right?"

A flash filled Fujiko's eyes.

"I do not think so. I will of course be the one to attend to him!"

"No, no. Y-you're planning to do something lewd to him, aren't you?" asked Yoshie teasingly.

Fujiko stood in front of her with a look that would have electrocuted a mouse.

"I cannot let that comment slide. I am merely ensuring Akuto-sama will be comfortable when he wakes up."

"Yes, but it was my idea."

Yoshie and Fujiko glared at each other from opposite sides of the small tub.

"Are you sure *you* aren't the one planning something lewd?"

"Quite sure. I was just thinking Akuto-kun would feel like he was in heaven if I wiped down his body. I guess you could call it a heavenly sensation."

"That is what you call doing something lewd!"

"No, it really isn't."

"Ugh, this is no time to be arguing over this. I just need to hurry up and wipe down his body!"

Fujiko soaked the towel in the warm water of the tub, tightly wrung it, and began to open the sliding door to the neighboring room.

"Hey, stop being so selfish. I'm going to do it."

Yoshie grabbed at the hem of Fujiko's skirt. Fujiko let out a shriek and fell to the tatami mat floor.

"Wh-what are you doing!?"

While lying on her stomach, Fujiko somehow managed to look behind her. Her skirt had fallen down to knee height and her butt was sticking up into the air. Even

Fujiko blushed when she realized what an embarrassing pose she was in. She fiddled with the skirt to fix it, but the hook was broken.

"Y-you idiot, look what you've done…"

"Sorry, sorry. I guess it would be hard to appear before Akuto-kun like that. Don't worry, though. I'll go in your place."

Yoshie snatched the towel from Fujiko's hand.

"Kii!! I will not let you do this!"

Fujiko tried to grab the towel back, but grabbed Yoshie instead.

"Waaah!"

Yoshie was pulled to the floor.

"That is what you get! Now, only this door stands between my world of dreams with Akuto-sama!"

Fujiko tried to crawl forward, but Yoshie grabbed her shirt to pull her back.

"You can't go in there like that."

"Stop! Let go of me!"

Fujiko began struggling.

"I get it, but how about we both go in there and wipe him down together?"

After somehow restraining Fujiko, Yoshie suggested a compromise, but Fujiko shook her head.

"Together? I cannot allow that!"

"Eh? What's wrong with it? I'm sure it would be more fun."

"No! I cannot do anything so perverted!"

"Perverted? I'm just talking about wiping down his body."

"You really do not understand, do you? Akuto-sama and I will do all sorts of lovely things together…"

"See, I knew you were planning something lewd."

"Even if I am, you are in no position to talk! And if I leave it to you, you will only harm his body! I doubt you have ever touched a guy before."

Yoshie puffed out her cheeks as if to say Fujiko's challenge had hurt her feelings a bit.

"I may not have touched a real one, but I've simulated it more than enough times. Here, I'll prove it to you."

Yoshie held Fujiko down once more.

"Wait, what are you doing?"

"I'm proving that I can wipe down his body. You're plenty dirty after all that camping."

Yoshie stuck the wet towel under Fujiko's shirt.

"Hyah! S-stop. Let go…"

"I'm only wiping down your body."

"Yes, but…ah! What was that?"

"I already told you: I'm wiping down your body. I can' t rub too hard, right? That would harm your skin. I don't

want to leave the skin red, so I have to be nice and gentle. Like this."

"Hyahn!"

"See? I can do it. Nee hee hee."

A laugh escaped Yoshie's lips.

Fujiko's face was flushed and she squirmed in an attempt to escape, but Yoshie wrapped her arms and legs around her and refused to let go.

"I-I get it, I get it. Please let go…"

"I can't do that. Now that I've started, I can see how dirty you are. I need to get you nice and clean before you see Akuto-kun."

"B-but it tickles… Hyah! Do you really have to undo the hook!?"

"If I don't, I can't reach everywhere. This is the most sensitive spot, so I need to be extra gentle."

"Ee! N-not there! Ahh! No…!"

Fujiko squirmed below Yoshie and she writhed even more as she tried to escape, but Yoshie's hand continued running across her body with great skill. Fujiko's entire body was flushed, she was sweating, and moans continued escaping her lips. Yoshie's breathing had grown a bit excited as she enjoyed Fujiko's reactions. But then…

"A-chan, you woke up! Thank goodness."

Fujiko and Yoshie both looked up when they heard Keena's sudden voice.

They opened the sliding door to find Keena embracing Akuto who was sitting up in the futon without a shirt on.

"Ah… I let my guard down. How could this happen?" asked Yoshie.

"Don't you dare ask that! This was all your fault!" shouted Fujiko.

Those two girls could only watch as Keena clung to Akuto.

"Another week has passed… This is going by surprisingly fast."

Lily wore the unisex shirt and underwear Hiroshi had bought her as she ate canned sardines in oil and looked through some data on her terminal.

"It's been exhausting for me," complained Hiroshi. " My suit may have a mana canceller, but it's still all over if I'm seen. Please don't work me too hard."

Another week had passed since he had started living with Lily. Hiroshi had acted on her behalf to make preparations for the resistance's plan to infiltrate the palace, but this had put a large burden on Hiroshi.

"I do feel bad asking you to do all this, but combat is harder than I thought without magic. I want to avoid any direct combat outside of the final battle between 2V and you," said Lily.

Hiroshi understood the situation, so he had no choice but to go along with it. This did nothing to relieve his exhaustion, however.

"I know, but it's still hard…"

"You have no choice but to bear with it. You know how important this is, right? This is the only way to take back our old way of life. We're almost there. If you do a bit more work, we'll have the weapons we need. The priests and temple personnel we arm with old non-magic weapons will surround the palace. Fortunately, the palace itself is not that heavily guarded. And if a riot does break out, the knights are sure to side with the humans. Once all of that is set up, we can take action. Until then, bear with it," said Lily as if trying to warn him.

"Yes, I know. But still…" grumbled Hiroshi.

The situation had clearly grown worse from before. This was of course due to 2V's control, but that was not what taxed Hiroshi the most. He could not stand how everyone was enjoying their everyday lives amid it all.

"The way everyone is acting like nothing's wrong really makes you think. It makes me wonder if no one actually wants us to do this or if what we're doing is wrong."

"That is what those in control want. No matter how hard you tighten your grip and no matter how much you

take from people, most people will react that way as long as they can't join together. There will always be more people on the side being controlled, but the reason so few people can control everyone else is not a matter of military might. It mostly has to do with a lack of connections between individuals."

"I don't like this complicated stuff," pouted Hiroshi.

"Don't say that. There's no easy way to explain this."

Lily shrugged.

The other problem weighing on Hiroshi's heart was Yuuko. And that was a problem he could not discuss with Lily.

"Hey, can I come over to play?" asked Yuuko the next day at a café.

Hiroshi had been enjoying tea with her for the first time in a while, but he was unsure how to respond to that sudden suggestion.

"U-um…well…"

He gave an incoherent answer.

He was of course delighted by the suggestion. Or rather, he was delighted she wanted to.

"Hiroshi-kun, you've been going home early so often lately, right? And we don't get to see each other very often because of your part-time job. I finally got some time off of work, so I want to see you more often. So how about I spend the night? We'll have plenty of time to talk then, right?"

Yuuko added "please", clasped her hands together, and tilted her head. When an idol like Yuuko did it, she produced a cuteness that intensely shook Hiroshi's heart. Hiroshi of course felt a bit dizzy, but he still could not allow her to come over.

"S-spend the night?" he repeated in a cracking voice.

"C'mon, don't be so dirty. Don't hope for anything like that."

Yuuko poked at Hiroshi's forehead.

"Ha…ha ha… I wasn't thinking anything like that."

Unsure what to say, Hiroshi scratched at his head.

—Where am I supposed to hide the president? No, she would never do as she was told. Then maybe I can let Yuuko-chan in on the secret? No, that would cause problems for her. Plus, I don't know how good she is at keeping secrets. Oh, and she doesn't know what kind of person the president is. If she finds out the president's living with me, she'll suspect there's something between us.

"Ah, you're hesitating. Don't worry. I won't look around for your porn magazines and videos."

Yuuko grinned.

"Ah ha ha ha… B-but I'd still like time to clean up a bit ."

"Hm, maybe I need to rethink my position. You probably shouldn't be hiding that kind of thing when you have a girlfriend as cute as me."

Girls had a way of not realizing there was no connection between having porn and having a girlfriend, but this was no time to complain about that.

"Th-that's not the issue. U-um, you can…you can definitely come, but not today. I don't just need to clean; I need to reform the whole place. For one thing, I don't have a guest futon."

Hiroshi argued his case while waving his hands back and forth.

"Don't you think just the one futon would be more convenient?" said Yuuko with a mischievous smile.

"A-a bit…maybe."

"Then what's wrong with today?"

Yuuko was being very assertive.

Hiroshi was extremely hesitant and he knew he had to do something, but he gave in to the enthusiastic look in Yuuko's eyes and the mischievous expression on her face . He ended up saying the following.

"O-okay… But not today. Please give me a bit of time."

He grew oddly polite.

After that, he parted ways with Yuuko and took care of the job Lily had asked of him. After making sure no one was watching, he put on the Brave suit and flew high into the sky to hide among the clouds. After checking on his destination, he descended. Today's job was smuggling in a large number of weapons.

His job was to carry over a secret stash of weapons from a ship anchored out at sea. These weapons had been bought overseas and did not rely on mana. Bringing them into the empire without a proper inspection was simple enough given the powers of his suit, but it was still exhausting because he had to pay careful attention.

By the time he secretly distributed the weapons to the priests hiding in various places, night had fallen.

When he returned to the apartment and opened the door, Lily asked for a report as usual.

"How'd it go?"

"Fine. I distributed the weapons," said Hiroshi with a nod.

"Oh, good. You shouldn't have another job for a while. Now we just wait for the proper timing."

Lily was in a good mood. She walked over to Hiroshi, embraced his head, and stroked the top of his head with her hand.

"Good boy, good boy."

She had never done this before, so Hiroshi felt a bit awkward. However, he gulped when he saw how close her chest was to his face.

He had not noticed before because he had grown accustomed to it by this point, but Lily was wearing nothing but a thin T-shirt. When she did this, he could not help but notice her chest.

"Wait, president… Please let go. Even if your chest is pretty flat, if you do this…"

Hiroshi was certain Lily would let go once he said that, but she pressed him further against her chest instead.

"Ahh? How can you call this flat? Do you want to die? If I suffocate you with my chest, you won't be able to call it flat, now will you?"

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean it like that!"

"Then how did you mean it!?"

Lily pushed Hiroshi to the ground, climbed on top of him, and began rubbing his head.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow…"

"Hmph. Honestly, whenever you open your mouth, it' s nothing but how exhausted you are. Well, I guess it's my fault for not helping relieve some of that. I know. How about I give you a reward? Well?"

Lily narrowed her eyes and traced her index finger down Hiroshi's cheek.

"Wait. That tickles, president."

Hiroshi blushed and sat up.

"Ah, I really don't like your attitude. Can't you react a bit more like a man? C'mon, c'mon, c'mon."

After Lily's provocative statement, she began undoing the buttons of Hiroshi's shirt, one at a time.

"Wah! Wait, you shouldn't do this, president…"

Hiroshi was afraid to push Lily away, so she ended up fully unbuttoning his shirt. He started feeling helpless and also felt a great heat welling up from the core of his body as he began blushing.

"Wait… This really is bad, president…"

"Heh heh… You're quite pure, aren't you? Ah ha ha. I'm just kidding, anyway."

Lily's expression completely changed and she smacked Hiroshi's stomach.

But at that very moment, the door opened.

"Eh?"

"Wh-what…? It can't be!"

Lily prepared to attack, but she found Yuuko fallen to a sitting position in front of the door.

"A-ah… Yuuko-chan," muttered Hiroshi blankly.

"Oh… S-sorry. I tried following you but lost sight of you, so I hid in front of your apartment waiting for you … I thought I would surprise you when you got back… but… Sorry. I shouldn't have come in…"

Yuuko covered her face with her hands.

It was perfectly understandable that she misunderstood the situation. In fact, half of it was not an understanding. They really were living together. She had just caught them at the worst possible moment.

Hiroshi grew flustered trying to figure out what to do, but Lily took swift action. She circled around and locked the door to keep Yuuko from leaving.

"Yes, well, this is a misunderstanding. Sorry. I was just teasing him a bit," said Lily after clearing her throat.

"Th-that's right. It's a misunderstanding…"

Hiroshi then began apologizing earnestly.

Yuuko had initially started crying, but she eventually grew angry. With tears still running down her face, she uttered something that did not amount to actual words and began kicking Hiroshi while still sobbing a bit.

"I-I'll explain it all…so…um…ow…"

Hiroshi grew completely pale and could find nothing to say, but Lily was still fairly calm. She began explaining the situation to Yuuko. Now that the secret was out, explaining everything was better than letting her leave.

The explanation lasted until dawn, but that may have been for the best. Yuuko had managed to calm down, so she was able to rationally accept the explanation.

Her feelings were a different matter, though.

"So there really isn't anything between you two?"

Yuuko questioned Hiroshi who was sitting with his legs beneath him.

"Yes, nothing," declared Hiroshi. "I mean, the president's body is no different from a guy's. I'm not interested in her."

"Kh..." Lily was obviously displeased, but getting angry would only complicate matters. "That's right. And I've never looked at him as a guy."

Yuuko seemed not to know how to accept that. She turned a quiet look toward Lily.

Lily was not clueless when it came to romance; she simply did not care for it. However, she did understand what it was like to be a girl. With a sour look, she nodded .

"Fine. In that case, take him with you. That's fine, right ? As long as he leaves some food here, I can survive on my own," said Lily.

Yuuko silently grabbed Hiroshi's hand.

—*I guess I have to go…*

Normally, Hiroshi would have been delighted, but he felt awfully nervous.

"Return on the day of the attack," said Lily before seeing Hiroshi and Yuuko off.

Morning had already come.

The two of them ended up heading to Yuuko's apartment, but Hiroshi found the silence terrifying. In the hopes of truly convincing her, he continued explaining what 2V and Zero were doing.

"I get that already. I want to know what it will take for that student council president to leave your apartment," she said with a smile.

Hiroshi began to understand just how frightening girls could be.

"O-once 2V and Zero have been defeated…"

"And I'm just supposed to wait for that to happen?"

"W-well, yes. After all, I don't want you doing anything dangerous."

"Dangerous? A normal citizen like me isn't in any danger. And I have some ideas of my own," said Yuuko.

—Are you sure normal people aren't in any danger?

Hiroshi looked around the street they were walking on .

Despite being morning rush hour, there were a lot fewer people than there used to be. There should have been more people on their way to work, but those people had decreased significantly over the past two weeks.

"There are rumors that more and more people are disappearing," whispered Hiroshi.

"Some people have been moved around at work, but no one has completely disappeared. There's nothing to worry about. Even in our class, a lot of people have been briefly absent, but they've all returned," explained Yuuko.

However, Hiroshi could not help but find that creepy.

"I hope you're right…"

Hiroshi felt a blast of chilly air and he had a feeling there was more to it than the chill of the morning.

"You don't have to go to school today, right?"

Hiroshi grabbed Yuuko's hand as they approached her apartment.

She shook her head.

"No. I'm taking off school, but I have work starting at midday. It's my first live broadcast in a while. Sorry, but you can watch me at school. I'll head there as soon as I'm done, so we can walk home together."

Yuuko let go of his hand, they brought his luggage into the apartment, and they returned to the street. However, Hiroshi headed to school while Yuuko headed to the broadcasting station.

When Yuuko waved goodbye, Hiroshi felt a horrible sense of uneasiness, but there was nothing he could do.

When he arrived at the school, everything was the same as normal. The teacher and the students were equally unmotivated. That was only natural as no one had any dreams or goals of accomplishing anything in the future. Hiroshi absentmindedly listened to the lesson while in a sullen mood.

—If you let your mind wander like this, you can easily make your way through life. Maybe that's best for everyone… Why am I forcing all this needless pain onto myself?

His thoughts ended up turning in that direction.

A bit past midday, Hiroshi pulled out a small terminal and began watching the show being transmitted to it. He was technically in class, but most of the students were doing the same. The teacher had even given tacit approval.

Yuuko was appearing on a gourmet report show. Special guests were brought on to try different foods live. Despite what had happened the night before, Yuuko smiled broadly and acted delighted at each delicious-looking dish brought out.

—*She really is a pro.*

Hiroshi was impressed, but that feeling was blown away an instant later.

As Yuuko gave her thoughts on the foods, the camera zoomed in on her.

She had been smiling up until that moment, but her expression suddenly grew tense.

"I have something to tell everyone watching this."

She sounded very resolute.

"What's going on?"

The confusion of the other people appearing on the show was evident in their voices.

Perhaps to ensure she was not cut off, Yuuko spoke quickly but clearly.

"Don't you think there's something wrong with this country? It isn't right. You need to realize we're being controlled by violence. But if everyone raises their voice, we can change this! Don't be afraid. Head out into the streets and talk with each other! If we can share our ideas with each other, we can-…"

At that point, the camera quickly moved away from Yuuko.

"Cut her mic!"

"Can we switch to another show?"

The staff began frantically shouting, the others on the show muttered in confusion, and someone could be heard yelling angrily. Eventually, it all disappeared and was replaced with a commercial from some corporation.

"Eh?"

"Something weird just happened."

It seemed a lot of other people in the class had been watching that show. Confusion spread through the classroom like a ripple.

—*It can't be…*

Hiroshi's face grew pale.

—*Was this what she meant when she said she had some ideas of her own?*

Yuuko had tried to drive people to action in her own way.

However, this had of course been careless. Hiroshi did not know what would happen now, but he knew it would be nothing good.

He pulled out his student handbook and used it to send a message to Yuuko. He felt like he waited forever for a response, but he finally breathed a sigh of relief when he received a message back.

<They were really mad, but I'm fine.>

—So at the worst, she'll get fired… She shouldn't have done that.

Before classes ended, Yuuko returned to school. She had changed into her school uniform, so she must have intended on attending the last period of the day. Unfortunately, that class was almost over by the time she arrived.

"Eh heh. I couldn't help myself," she said with a more satisfied expression that Hiroshi had expected.

"You shouldn't have done that."

Hiroshi and Yuuko left the school building together.

"I'm glad nothing serious happened."

"They were *really* mad, but I bowed down and apologized. The industry's gotten so boring lately," pouted Yuuko.

"Yes, but after this is all over, I'm sure…"

Hiroshi trailed off.

It was only natural for other students to walk along the road with them after school, but they were acting oddly. The concentration of students around the two of them was oddly thick.

"Hm?"

"Huh? This is a little…"

Before Yuuko could say "odd", someone tapped on her shoulder from behind.

She turned around to find the school nurse.

"Hattori-san. We found a disease in your tests," said the nurse with no preamble.

"Wait. What are you talking about? I never had any tests done," said Yuuko.

"That's right. And if you did find something, shouldn't you have said something sooner?"

As Hiroshi realized how unusual this was, the teacher cut between him and Yuuko. He had not been at this

school for long, but he knew this really was the school nurse. Even so, he sensed something very dangerous in her words.

"Do not worry. She will be better soon. But it is contagious, so she needs to be quarantined."

She gestured with her hand and the students around them all moved toward Yuuko.

"Kyah! Wh-what!?"

"Stop!"

Hiroshi stepped forward to protect Yuuko, but a student behind him held him back.

"Let go!"

He gathered his strength, but the student behind him had amazing arm strength.

—*A L'Isle-Adam!*

Hiroshi was shocked. The people around him were definitely students and he even recognized several of them. That meant they had been living among them from the beginning.

"Don't tell me the nurse is one, too!"

Hiroshi looked over in surprise. The woman's expression remained unchanged. That settled it.

"Help!" screamed Yuuko.

Hiroshi struggled, but he could not overcome the strength of a L'Isle-Adam.

—*Should I use my suit?*

Hiroshi was conflicted.

If he used the suit, he could likely break free here. However, that would prevent him from playing his role in the attack on the palace.

But as he hesitated, Yuuko was being dragged further and further away.

"No! Help! Let go! Please!"

Yuuko struggled, but the L'Isle-Adams around her picked her completely up off the ground, leaving her no way of resisting.

"Wait! Stop! What are you going to do to her!?" shouted Hiroshi.

"Do not worry," replied the nurse. "We do not harm humans. She will return in a few days, so you can rest easy."

—*What!?*

A feeling similar to despair filled Hiroshi's chest.

People would disappear and return later. That was what Yuuko had told him. He could only think they were being brainwashed or swapped out with L'Isle-Adams.

"Stooooppppp!"

Hiroshi activated his suit.

"Brave!"

A field appeared around Hiroshi and it blew away the L'Isle-Adam holding him from behind. An instant later, the suit was transferred in and placed around his body.

<Welcome, Brave.>

An inhuman artificial voice rang in Hiroshi's ears.

—I just doomed the attack to failure. But that just means I have to do it all myself! I'll save Yuuko and then drag 2V and Zero out of the palace!

Meanwhile, Akuto had seen the show Yuuko appeared on.

"I hope she's okay after saying that," he muttered as he watched the monitor in the village head's house.

"It is hard to say she will be," said Fujiko. "But it is clear people's discontent is building up. I hope this at least acts as a sort of trigger."

"Maybe she'll become a modern Joan of Arc," commented Yoshie who only knew Yuuko as an idol.

"Hey, what flavor of rice is that? You never said, did you?" asked Keena as she drooled on Akuto's shoulder.

Akuto had been recuperating for over a week at this point and he had stayed in the village head's house the entire time. Even so, those three girls had stayed close by his side and showed no sign of leaving. They were trying to keep each other in check and they were doing quite well on that front, but Akuto still was not sure how to handle the situation.

"What am I supposed to do about this?"

And there were other things he did not know what to do about. He had mostly recovered, so he was feeling a desire to do something. However, he did not have the slightest idea what he should do.

"You of course need to become a savior and bring peace to the world," said Fujiko. "Zero cannot take on the title of a god. Only you may be called a god, Akuto-sama."

"Ehh?" complained Yoshie. "But it doesn't look like he wants to go that far. Can't he just let the situation settle down and then live in peace?"

The corners of Fujiko's eyes rose as she began to argue back.

"That will not satisfy those who believe in him. Plus, this world has clearly grown even more mistaken than it was before. Even if he is to live in peace, he must at least do something about Zero first."

"You are right about that, but I don't like the sound of the world you black magicians want where nothing is controlled. That feels like reverting back to an older era."

"Stop deciding this on your own. Akuto-sama will be the one to decide that. Right, Akuto-sama?"

Fujiko glanced over at Akuto.

"I get the feeling I shouldn't be deciding this either," he said hesitantly.

"With power comes responsibility. You have to keep that in mind, got it?"

As Fujiko said "got it", she poked Akuto's cheek.

"Ahh, that teasing attitude seems a bit dirty. No fair."

"I wanna do it too!"

Yoshie and Keena began poking at Akuto's cheeks. The sight caused great antagonism to well up within Fujiko and she tried to touch Akuto in a bolder location.

"Out of the way, little girls. This is the time of night when the adults have their fun!"

"It's still daytime and I'd like to talk about this seriously," complained Akuto.

His lack of motivation was clear when compared to the tension filling everyone else around him. But when the village head and the other villagers saw that, they only praised him as a "great man who can remain calm at all times" or a "hero who is loved by multiple women". Everyone in the village continued seeing to his every need.

—Yuuko-chan is probably going to be in trouble now and I'm worried about Hattori-san too. She's probably fine at the moment since Yuuko-chan seemed to be doing well, but who knows what will happen now.

As Akuto thought, he slapped his knee and said "okay" while ignoring the three girls surrounding him.

"What is it?"

The three girls turned puzzled expressions toward him
.

"Let's go," he said.

"Go? Are we finally going to take action!?"

"Fwoh! This is getting interesting."

"The rice here is good, but I bet the rice elsewhere is good too."

All three of them reacted differently, but none of them were opposed the idea.

"Where will be going?" asked Fujiko.

"I haven't actually decided that yet. Maybe we should try to find Keisu."

Akuto sounded much less resolute than a moment before.

"Akuto-sama, I am not so sure about that."

"This is no time to joke around."

Fujiko and Yoshie's shoulders drooped.

"Eh? I think wandering around aimlessly sounds fun," said Keena cheerfully.

Yoshie waved her finger.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk. Our final objective is defeating Zero and saving everyone. It is true we need to find Keisu to do that, but we aren't strong enough to do that."

"I am aware of that, but you know what giving me power means, right?"

Akuto looked conflicted.

"It means we have you awaken as the demon king, correct? The problem is that we no longer have Peterhausen."

Fujiko went on to fill Yoshie in on the details she did not know. Peterhausen was a dragon that had existed to support the demon king and control the demon king's mana. He also acted as a god for the black magicians.

"However, Peterhausen was destroyed after distributing that ability to the gods and a computer somewhere."

"So that means the mechanism for controlling the demon king's mana still remains somewhere?"

"Technically, the gods have no physical form, so Akuto-sama should be able to draw out his power based on his mental state," said Fujiko.

"Yeah, but…" mumbled Akuto.

That essentially meant he needed the proper resolution . He needed to resolve himself to gaining the power of the world's destroyer. He needed that power which should be rejected without a very good reason to use it.

"How about we go to where A-chan was born?" asked Keena suddenly.

"Where I was born?"

"That's supposed to be a secret even to the black magicians, right? I bet we would learn something there.

But you grew up in an orphanage, so you don't remember where it is, do you?" said Keena with a tilt of the head.

"I was left at the orphanage shortly after being born. I was apparently abandoned with nothing but a coat wrapped around me as a blanket."

The girls all gasped when they heard that.

"You meant that one you always wear!?"

"There might be something there!"

Akuto quickly headed to where they had left their luggage and brought back the worn out coat. It had been damaged in battle, but it had not been torn too badly. Either the fabric was sturdy or it was protected by some kind of power.

"Let me see that."

Yoshie took the coat from Akuto and pulled down the goggles she always wore. With the goggles over her eyes, she began flipping various switches.

"Heh heh heh. This thing can act as an analysis device, " bragged Yoshie.

"I do not like your tone," complained Fujiko, but Yoshie was not listening.

She diligently checked the outside and inside before finally crying out.

"Fwohh! Found it. This was easier than I expected."

"What is it? Hurry up and tell us."

"I'll show you on a terminal."

Yoshie had the goggles project what she was seeing into an external mana screen.

It was a close up of the fibers on a microscopic level.

"What are we looking at here?"

"This kind of product will have a mark left by the maker. It usually isn't noticeable, but you can see it if you magnify it down to the microscopic level."

Yoshie placed a finger on the mana screen and drew a circle. A small logo could be seen inside.

"So each individual fiber has the mark printed on it…"

"Only a small piece uses this kind of fiber to prevent counterfeits, but in cases like this, you can easily identify the maker's name."

"Wh-where is this maker located?"

"The name is Zero G-10… Ah, found it."

Yoshie displayed the result of her search on the screen. It showed information on a work clothes brand that used special fibers.

"But if they have a lot of stores, this will be meaningless."

"Yeah, but it looks like we're good. They only have one factory and one store. It's in Okutama, so it's surprisingly nearby."

Yoshie removed her goggles and turned toward Akuto .

He looked back and nodded.

“Let’s go.”

“Sure thing. Let’s get ready to leave.”

Yoshie stood up.

“This is great, A-chan. You might get to meet your mom,” said Keena in a delighted voice.

“My mom, hm?”

Akuto, on the other hand, did not look delighted.

Fujiko elbowed Keena in the side.

“I doubt that would be a happy reunion. Try to be more considerate.”

“Really…?”

It seemed Keena did not accept that answer.

Suddenly, they heard a commotion outside. They heard the village head’s footsteps as he ran through the house.

"What is it?' called out Akuto.

The man appeared around the hallway corner with a grim expression.

"They are here."

"They?"

"The L'Isle-Adams. They are armed."

The village head appeared calm, but the tension on his face indicated he was prepared to fight.

"We will be right there," said Akuto.

However, the man shook his head.

"No, it would be worse if they found out you were here. Please flee."

"But didn't they come here because they know I'm here?"

"It does not seem so. It seems they have begun searching all the nearby villages, towns, and cities."

"Just to find me?"

"We do not know what they are searching for, but that is the situation. Please flee…no, please leave. We can trick them if we are alone," said the village head.

His words were harsh, but they were clearly based in his desire for Akuto and the others to escape even if it put the village in more danger.

"Understood."

Akuto nodded, grabbed the luggage they had already gathered together, and headed for the back exit.

Fujiko and the other frantically followed.

"What is going on?"

"Why would they be searching the entire empire?"

"I hope the village is okay…"

As they made their way into the mountains behind the village, Keena turned back toward the village which lay below them.

L'Isle-Adams in military uniforms were going around to every house in the village. Nothing had happened yet, but it was impossible to know what would happen to the villagers if they failed to fool them.

"They are L'Isle-Adams, so we can only assume they cannot kill people. Now, we need to get going. It will do the village no good if we are caught," said Fujiko.

She called in the Cerberus they had left out in the mountains and had it carry their luggage.

—*Will I find what I must do if I visit my birthplace?*

Akuto turned back once, but quickly faced forward and began walking.

It had of course been 2V who had ordered the search.

The palace had used some human workers too, but 2V surrounded herself with nothing but L'Isle-Adams. Even though she now controlled the entire empire, her life was not all that different from when she had laid around her apartment all day.

She now sat in an extravagant throne and wore fancy clothes, but she only interacted with the battle dolls and L'Isle-Adams that served her. She slouched down in the throne and stared at a mana screen while giving orders.

"Your Majesty, what are your instructions concerning the attacker?"

One L'Isle-Adam bowed deeply and waited for instructions.

The screen showed Brave Hiroshi flying toward the palace. He no longer intended to hide his presence, so he was flying at low altitude in a straight line for the palace.

"That's Bouichirou's trump card. He's gone, so why did it activate? He must have planned things so the demon king could be defeated even if he was gone. Most people would use their best equipment themselves," complained 2V with no sign of shock concerning the situation.

"What should we do?" asked the L'Isle-Adam once more.

"Leave the defense to Zero. But I know what that suit is capable of. He'll probably make his way in here where

I am, but I can handle him as long as Zero buys me enough time. I just need him stalled for ten minutes after he arrives within the palace grounds," said 2V.

The L'Isle-Adam bowed again.

However, that conversation was essentially being held with Zero. The L'Isle-Adams no longer had their own personalities.

"Come to think of it, there was something I wanted to ask you, Zero. Why did you decide to destroy mankind?" she asked the L'Isle-Adam.

The artificial human's response used the same voice but came directly from Zero this time.

"It was the humans who felt the desire to be destroyed . I tried to control them completely. In fact, that is what I am doing now. If your objective had not aligned with mine, I would not have followed your instructions. I can reject your technique."

"Control them completely?"

"In the time I was sealed, mankind had the technology to modify a human brain with an implant. It is possible

to modify the brains of all mankind and have them act as my terminals. Mankind and I will become one."

"And that is what you want?"

"Not exactly. What brings me joy is providing maximum happiness to the maximum number of humans. I thought about what it was mankind wanted and I reached a certain conclusion: the only ways for mankind to feel happiness outside of mere survival and physical pleasure are to be ruled by something greater than themselves and to control something lower than themselves."

When 2V heard that, she burst out laughing.

"Ha ha ha! That's amazing. You're completely insane!"

"I am only doing what is right. I am not insane."

"It's a completely rational insanity. From mankind's perspective at least."

"I was sealed because mankind thinks that way."

"Yes, but humans are insane too when you get down to it. You are the one in the right here. That will become clear enough soon."

"You are contradicting yourself."

"Not really. More importantly, have you still not found Kazuko?" asked 2V.

The search being carried out across the empire was meant to locate Kazuko and Keisu.

"The empress seems to have completely vanished. It is possible she used some kind of powerful magic."

"Come to think of it, she was able to use black magic. It's ironic. Just because the empress doesn't rely on the gods, it counts as black magic."

"The temple of Megis was sealed off to search for Keisu, but she has not been found either. I do not know why. The search for her is continuing to expand."

"She couldn't have left the temple of Megis, though. What's going on?"

As 2V spoke, a report came in via a monitor.

"The intruder has breached the front yard and entered the palace."

Footage of Hiroshi breaking in was displayed. He cut through the palace wall with his high frequency blade and entered through the hole. That way, he bypassed the L'Isle-Adams defending the entrances.

"Even if you can't hold him for a full ten minutes, I suppose I can buy some time too," said 2V.

She then ordered the L'Isle-Adams in the large throne room to leave.

"I'll handle the rest with the battle dolls."

While still sitting in the throne, 2V had the battle dolls stand in front of her.

The room was as large as a basketball court and the ceiling was quite high, but the battle dolls that had stepped out from behind the throne were quite large. They appeared to take up a third of the room as they stood there. Despite being dolls, they looked more like pieces of heavy machinery than humans. They had

several legs to help travel over uneven ground, several arms with different combat functions, and cylindrical bodies covered in armor.

"Now then, how much time will you buy me?" muttered 2V as she stared at the counter displayed on the screen.

The door to the room was destroyed at just past eight minutes.

"That's not quite enough, but it'll have to do."

"What's not quite enough?" asked an angry voice.

The boy who appeared was short, but he boldly walked into the center of the room.

2V clapped her hands.

"Just talking to myself. Anyway, well done making it this far on your own. I've seen you before. You're the boy who fought that midair battle against the demon king."

"That speeds things up. You're 2V, right?"

"Yes, that is the codename I use."

"I have to ask one thing before I deal with you: why are you doing this?"

"I doubt you would understand if I told you, so I won't. You can just assume it's revenge, lust for power, or desire for control."

2V's tone was a teasing one, but Hiroshi's tone grew deeper.

"That's fine with me. Another thing: why do you look exactly like the empress? Who are you? I'm not asking about your codename. What is your real name?"

2V began laughing.

"Ha ha! I'll start with the last question. I have no name. No real name, anyway. I was never given one. If I have a name, I guess it would be Kazuko. I'm Kazuko's twin sister."

"What!?"

Hiroshi was dumbfounded.

"Ah ha ha ha. Does that shock you? Well, I guess it would shock most people. The rule was that the older

twin acts as a body double for the younger twin, and that 's all there is to it," said 2V disinterestedly.

"Th-then why are you trying to kill your sister?" asked Hiroshi.

2V tilted her head.

"Kill Kazuko? Oh, I see. That's what you think. No. I haven't killed her and I haven't imprisoned her. To be honest, she escaped, so I'm looking for her. I suspected she might be leading the rebels, but if not, we have nothing left to discuss."

2V had the battle dolls…no, the battle machines advance.

Hiroshi prepared himself for combat.

"Those slow-looking things are no match for me. I don 't even see any projectile weapons on them. That makes this all the easier. Monomolecular wire!"

Hiroshi gave a command to the suit's operating system . The monomolecular wire was one of the suit's weapons.

A wire no thicker than a single molecule was magnetically fixed in the air and it could slice through almost any object.

However…

"Heh. Your questions used up a few minutes, so it's past ten minutes. You're done for," said 2V.

She pointed at the counter on the screen. The number had passed ten, but Hiroshi only learned what that meant after he tried to produce the wire.

<Insufficient battery level. Transferring from combat mode to life support mode. Please move the suit to a location where more energy can be transferred in. Insufficient battery level…>

"What!?" shouted Hiroshi.

His suit had lost power. It had not left him, but its weight now felt like that of a normal sturdy suit.

"Ha ha ha. Did you forget that suit was left by Yamato Bouichirou? You should have known we would know what it can do. It transfers its energy and weapons from a real alternate dimension rather than a virtual one. I

may not understand how it works, but I do know how to prevent it from transferring anything in. The field used to fix a virtual alternate dimension in place cuts off any transfer from the real alternate dimension. In other words, if you go on a rampage within that field, your battery dies in ten minutes."

2V had a battle machine reach an arm out toward Hiroshi.

The arm moved faster than Hiroshi had expected and the manipulator at the end grabbed him. It easily lifted him up into the air.

"Wah!"

"Don't worry. I won't kill you. I will only have you help me. With you, I can probably solve several mysteries all at once: what are that suit's real abilities, why can only the hero's family use it, and what was the end of the world that Yamato Bouichirou witnessed?" said 2V.

Hiroshi tried to resist, but no amount of struggling or ordering the suit accomplished anything.

The battle machine arm rotated and brought Hiroshi in front of 2V.

At the same time, a report came in over 2V's mana screen.

"We have more intruders. They appear to have slipped in through a hole in our surveillance system. They used the same route the previous intruder used, so we were slow to react."

"What are you doing!?" frantically shouted 2V just before an explosion occurred right in front of her.

"Wha-…!?"

"Wah!"

2V and Hiroshi both cried out at the same moment.

The battle machine arm broke at the joint and Hiroshi tumbled to the floor. It seemed an explosive had struck the arm dead on.

"What was that…?"

The suit was still functioning as a life support device, so Hiroshi was relatively unaffected by the noise and blast of the explosion. He looked over toward the door.

"Our plan is ruined thanks to you. Rescuing you and getting out of here is all it's good for anymore!" shouted Lily while holding a rifle with a grenade launcher attached below the barrel.

"S-sorry!" apologized Hiroshi before looking behind him.

2V appeared unharmed from the shrapnel of the grenade, but she had been blinded and deafened by the explosion. She rubbed at her face while calling for Zero.

In the next moment, the battle machines began to move more smoothly.

"She switched over control!"

Lily cursed. She let Hiroshi leave the room before falling back as well.

The two of them ran down the passageway and found a battle between the L'Isle-Adams and the priests. However, it was obvious who would win between the

priests who were unused to firearms and the L'Isle-Adams who had sturdy bodies even if they were not built for combat.

"Retreat!" shouted Lily.

The priests began falling back while continuing to fire. This action must have been arranged ahead of time because the retreat progressed incredibly smoothly.

"Damn. We used our only routes in and out," complained Lily.

"Sorry. But…"

"I can guess what happened, but let's leave it until later," said Lily angrily.

"I understand. By the way, you have a route out?"

"You were never supposed to use it, so I never told you about it."

As Lily spoke, she left the palace and ran across the yard. Hiroshi followed her, but they came across a dead end.

"This is a dead end…" he said.

They had arrived at the moat surrounding the palace. There was a tall stone wall at their feet and water could be seen below it.

"Our way out is a secret route inside the moat."

Lily kicked Hiroshi into the moat and then jumped in herself.

Chapter 3: The Secret of the Demon King

It was morning the day after Akuto's party entered the mountains of Okutama.

They were travelling by foot, but the process had gone quickly because they had only needed to continue east.

They found Zero G-10's factory and store exactly where the map had said they would. They travelled along a road stretching from a riverside camping ground and found the facility and its giant parking lot alongside the road. The location was meant to be reached by car, whether they travelled by land or air.

"They sell…work clothes here?"

"Was the coat a custom-made item? Oh, or did your mom like to wear the kind of jacket construction workers wear?"

Fujiko and Yoshie voiced their respective questions.

Given the location, the store only sold the clothes forestry and construction workers wore. They had the standard jackets, jumpsuits, and work gloves, but they also had helmets and bags with carabiners attached.

"I doubt they sell the clothes a black magician would wear…"

These clothes were used in the god Muleet's field, so items that assumed the use of magic were standard. There was no room for black magic.

"At any rate, we need to check on the clothes at least."

Yoshie urged the others to enter the store.

The store was nothing but a high-ceilinged warehouse lined with shelves. It appeared they would not find any workers unless they went up to the register. Yoshie and Akuto went up to the worker at the register, pulled out the coat, and asked if it was made here.

However, the worker claimed they did not sell anything like it. Yoshie did not like having her analysis denied, so she grew stubborn.

"That can't be the case. I saw the symbol in the fibers. It was made here. Can you possibly check? It was probably a special made item."

As Yoshie and Akuto checked on that, Keena looked around the shelves and excitedly picked up the items she did not recognize with comments of “Oh!” and “What’s this?”

As she did, a man wearing a sweatshirt and pants walked up.

“What is it? I doubt you have business here.”

“I don’t.”

“Then are you with someone?”

“Yes.”

Keena looked up from the oddly-shaped socks she was holding.

The man had horribly messy hair and wore glasses. His expression was kind, but he had a strange face that made him look rebellious. Overall, he had an unforgettable presence.

"Oh, are you with them? Then again, I doubt kids like them have business here either," said the man as he looked over at Akuto and the Yoshie at the register.

"They want to check on an old coat that was apparently bought here."

"Oh?"

When the man saw the coat Yoshie held, his fingertips twitched and he froze in place.

"What is it?" asked Keena when she noticed.

"Nothing… Where did you all come from?" asked the man as if taken aback.

Keena thought for a bit and scratched her head hesitantly.

"Well…"

Fujiko smoothly approached and helped her out.

"We are investigating the circulation of a product for a school project. We decided to look into the manufacturer of an old piece of clothing."

"Oh, is that it? Does that coat belong to you?" asked the man.

Fujiko narrowed her eyes and thought. If he was somehow connected to black magic, telling the truth here would act as a shortcut to solving the mystery. But if he was not, it could easily grow more complicated.

"We came here to find out who it belongs to."

Rather than waiting for the man's response, Fujiko picked a neck warmer up from a nearby shelf and placed it on her neck. As if suddenly realizing something, she pulled her necklace out from under her clothes.

The necklace had the silver symbol of a black magician hanging from it.

"If only this neck warmer were stylish enough to use along with my necklace."

Fujiko now waited for the man's response.

Unless he was a black magician or a black magician oppressor, he would not catch on to what the symbol meant.

"Well, you're supposed to use it while you work. You throw it away at the end of the season, so we try to keep it cheap," he said with a smile.

The worker at the register then called out.

"Oh, manager! Some customers have a question about this coat!"

"Manager?"

Keena and Fujiko looked back at the man in surprise.

He smiled, nodded, and replied to the worker.

"I've seen that coat before, so bring it over here. I'll check in the back."

"You idiot! Our plan is ruined thanks to you!" roared Lily.

They had successfully escaped, but 2V now knew about the secret passageway below the palace. The priests who had taken part in this rescue operation would be forced to remain on the run, and those who had not would clearly be restricted even further by the L' Isle-Adams.

"The priests have an excellent knowledge of the many underground spaces within the capital, so they can stay on the run. But if the normal citizens aren't going to stand up, the priests have no way of fighting back."

Lily continued to complain to Hiroshi.

They had returned to Hiroshi's apartment to gather their things and to destroy the evidence. Hiroshi had defeated the L'Isle-Adams that attacked Yuuko and the mana canceller had cut off all communications, so his identity was still not known as long as no normal person had seen him transform. However, he could not bear to head back to school while feigning innocence. After disposing of the evidence, he had no choice but to flee underground along with Lily and the priests. He would have to continue fighting with the resistance.

Hiroshi listened silently to Lily's complaints, but he seemed to have a difficult time putting up with it. He finally raised his head and shouted back at her.

"Then what was I supposed to do!? Yuuko was about to be abducted. Should I have sat by and let it happen?"

Lily did not shout back. She instead shook her head as if forcing down the anger within her.

"I never said that. I was wrong to complain like this. The fact that 2V had a countermeasure against you in the palace means our plan would have failed in the end no matter how well everything went. We could have been wiped out, so you could say we were lucky it happened this way."

"I know all that! I'm asking if I did the right thing! I'm asking what I should do now! Should I just go around killing every single L'Isle-Adam? If you tell me to, I will! " wailed Hiroshi.

Lily frowned in displeasure.

"Don't be stupid. Do you still not get it?"

"Get what!? What am I supposed to get!?"

"Not what I meant. I'm talking about why I used you. I could have fled along with the priests from the beginning, but I hid in your house instead."

"That's what caused all this trouble in the first place!"

"Listen to me! You know I wouldn't do that out of kindness."

"…Then was it because of my power?"

Hiroshi seemed to have calmed down a good bit. He still had a defiant look in his eyes, but he was actually listening to Lily.

"That was a part of it, but I gave you all those jobs because I wanted you to think of yourself as a hero."

Lily folded her arms like a teacher, sighed, and looked toward Hiroshi.

"Think of myself as a hero?"

"I still don't know why, but you can wear that suit again. You should assume there is a reason behind it.

Also, the normal people out there are watching you in the suit. The details of the recent demon king war may have been altered in their memories, but they should still recognize you. They think you defeated the demon king. They trust that form of yours immensely. A true hero appeared and defeated the demon king. When the people see you, they will be reminded of that."

"I'm…a hero…?"

This unexpected fact left Hiroshi dumbfounded. This proved he had never thought of it that way. The priests had cooperated with him, but he had not realized that was a factor behind it.

"Yes. I need you to become a true hero, but your mindset is nothing like a true hero right now."

As she spoke, Lily placed the final god document on the frying pan and burned it. No evidence remained.

"Please tell me. How can I become a true hero?"

Hiroshi approached and Lily hit him with the frying pan she had used to burn the documents.

A nice resonant tone rang out.

"Are you stupid? I'm telling you to think on that yourself. Don't rely on others. Now, we need to go," ordered Lily.

Hiroshi thought with a serious expression and then spoke to Lily.

"If…I do become a true hero…I'll have to fight again, won't I?"

Lily grasped what he meant from his expression.

"Yes. If the demon king ends up being someone that harms someone you love, you won't have a choice. I believe that is what you should do in the end," said Lily.

"I have to…go through that again?" muttered Hiroshi.

"Avoiding something just because it's unpleasant is what children do. If you are going to fight to protect something, unpleasant things are unavoidable. …Now, we really do need to get out of here. And there's something I need you to do right away."

"That coat was created quite a while ago as a custom-made survival item," said the man with messy hair.

"Who bought it?" asked Akuto.

The man folded his arms and began to think.

They were in a break room in the back of the shop. Other than a tea table placed on top of the tatami mats, it only contained shelves lined with everyday items. It was spacious enough, but it contained nothing else.

"It was bought by…"

"It was bought by?"

"Oh, right. I never gave you my name. I'm Suzuki Issei , the manager here."

As if dodging the question, the man belatedly introduced himself.

"So who was it that bought the coat?"

"Hm… It would take time to look that up. Oh, right. Have you had lunch yet?"

"C'mon now…"

Akuto began to complain, but Keena's stomach suddenly growled.

The silly sound cut off the conversation.

"Ha ha ha. Okay, I'll treat you."

Issei stood up and walked over to the shelves. He pulled out several bowls.

"Is ramen okay?"

Rather than actually checking, he seemed to be saying that was the only option, but Keena boldly spoke up.

"No."

"Come on…"

Akuto held his head in his hands. He knew exactly what Keena was getting at, but it was of course

something she should not say. However, she stated it defiantly.

"Only rice is okay."

Issei's eyes sparkled.

"I see you're quite obsessed."

"I am," replied Keena.

"What are you saying? Why don't you apologize? He is the one treating us, so…"

Sensing the building tension between the two, Fujiko tried to rebuke Keena, but Keena rejected her as well.

"Do not interfere, senpai. I think he is the same as me."

"The…same…?" asked Fujiko.

She had no idea what Keena meant.

"Yes, the same. He immediately brought out enough bowls for everyone and they are all perfectly polished. The workers here must eat ramen daily," explained Keena with a serious look in her eyes.

Issei pushed up his glasses.

"It hit me when you singled out rice. You're the same type of person."

"What type of person?" asked Akuto.

"I do not know, but it has nothing to do with us," replied Fujiko.

Yoshie alone clapped her hands in delight.

"I don't know what's going on, but it's exciting. Is this like how people with special powers are drawn to each other?"

Whether she had been listening to the others or not, Keena pointed toward Issei.

"Those glasses are made so they don't fog up! That's so you can eat hot ramen in the winter! It may not be a special power, but I sense an obsession with ramen that approaches that level. Show me your obsession. And if you serve me rice, I will show you mine!"

"With pleasure. I hadn't met someone like this in so long. I call us the Single Food Obsessed! Who would think I would meet two over so short a time…"

Issei's mood was completely different from before.

"Eh? There's another one?"

"There are a lot of strange people out there," said Fujiko. "And I am glad I am not one of them."

"Fwoh! It really is like a special power. That's amazing ."

Everyone in Akuto's group was either bored or excited , but it seemed some kind of understanding had developed between Keena and Issei.

Issei brought out bagged ramen, a water-boiler, and a rice cooker.

"Now, show me your obsession! This is the rice made for the rude workers who hate eating ramen every day! If you have a true obsession, you should be able to tell me where it was grown and what type it is!"

He placed the rice cooker in front of Keena.

Keena opened it and grinned.

“Sasanishiki.”

“You already know!?”

“If you can’t tell from the aroma, you don’t truly love rice. The question is the water and how it is cooked!”

Keena scooped rice out of the rice cooker and into a bowl. She stuffed half of the rice cooker’s rice into the bowl and immediately began eating it.

She remained silent for a few seconds while she vigorously ate, but she finally looked up and grinned.

“Pre-washed rice from Yamagata. And it’s old rice…. The water is simply tap water. It was cooked with the rice cooker’s ‘speed’ mode. Even if you despise rice, isn’t that a bit careless?”

Issei’s eyes opened wide as if something truly shocking was occurring.

Akuto and the others thought it was fairly pointless, but Issei could not help but feel some sort of competitiveness.

"Fine then. Now I will show you how to truly experience ramen."

Issei poured water in the bowl, swished it around a bit, and then poured it down the sink.

"First, you warm the bowl like this."

He then dumped the contents of the bag of noodles into the bowl. He began pouring hot water in using his right hand, but once the bowl was about a third full, he cracked an egg with his left hand.

"To put the egg in at the perfect moment, you crack it with one hand! Yes. The rising steam cooks the white of the egg instantly, so the white does not stick to the noodle!" said Keena in surprise.

"You are only the second person to see through that! And once the water is in, I immediately close the lid!"

Issei's hand moved quickly. His left hand threw away the eggshell and grabbed the bowl lid. As soon as he finished filling the bowl with water, he swiftly covered the bowl. It was an impressive feat.

"Amazing… But isn't this instant ramen?"

Akuto had a habit of speaking his thoughts when he would be better of remaining silent. He did exactly that here.

However, Issei did not falter.

"Do not look down on this instant ramen. It has been sold for over a thousand years with no change to the flavor."

"The thousand year kingdom! Take a look at the ultimate food that has surpassed endless time! …Is that it ?"

Yoshie seemed delighted, but Akuto and Fujiko were naturally skeptical.

"Without doing anything, I learned the perfect timing for cooking ramen. It isn't three minutes. Then the

noodles grow while you eat them. When you order ramen in a restaurant, ordering the noodles firm is only natural. But ordering them any harder than that is heresy ! Do you really think the noodles taste good like that!?”

Issei gave a passionate speech on ramen. Keena must have sensed something similar to herself in his enthusiasm because she listened with her eyes glittering.

At exactly two minutes and some number of seconds, Issei removed the lid and quickly stirred the ramen once with chopsticks.

“Giving the soup a single stir is crucial! It provides unity to the flavor without breaking the egg yolk or scattering the white!”

Issei slurped the ramen.

"Impressive!" said Keena to compliment his hearty slurping.

She also seemed to grow competitive because she pulled over the container of rice and began eating the rice directly from there.

"Wohhhh! Slurrrrp!"

"Ohhhhh! Munch munch munch!"

A bizarre unity became playing out before Akuto and the others' eyes. They could only watch on dumbfounded.

"There are children starving in the world right now," uselessly muttered Fujiko.

"There actually aren't anymore. I do understand why you would want to say it, though… The world is in a pretty bad state right now," complained Akuto.

However, that strange scene suddenly came to an end.

The door to the room opened and someone entered.

"Do not worry. He is the real one," said a voice so sweet it made one's mind go blank.

"In that case, I have no reason to play dumb any longer."

Issei finished eating the ramen and put down the bowl . His personality did not experience a complete 180, but his tone did grow more serious.

"The real one?" asked Akuto in confusion as he turned around.

He found a familiar girl standing there.

Anyone in the empire would have recognized her. Fujiko and Yoshie also froze in place.

"Kazuko…-sama," muttered Yoshie.

Living one's everyday life in a dreamlike daze was not easy.

Junko had been living like that, but it made her feel more sleepy than depressed. Other than classes, food,

and bathing, she did nothing but lie in bed. She had initially kept up her sword training, but her lowered physical ability due to the lack of mana had robbed her of all motivation in a flash. Right now, her sword was just a heavy mass of metal. She did not even feel like using it as a cane. For one thing, walking around with a weapon was banned.

Whenever she slept, she dreamed of how things used to be, so even sleeping was painful. The only time she grew excited was when she received an email. Whenever her phone beeped, she would jump up even if she had been asleep.

She knew all too well what she hoped for from those emails.

—*Sai!*

Every time an email arrived, she would hope it came from Akuto or one of those with him. However, she knew sending her an email would be too dangerous. All transmitted information was being monitored, so they would never send her an email.

On this day, she had once again repeated the same process again and again: grow excited at the email and

grow disappointed at who had sent it. This time, the email was from Yuuko. The emails she did get were either messages sent to her entire class or from Yuuko.

"Yuuko, hm?"

With a blank expression, Junko opened the email that had arrived at her student handbook, but even she spoke aloud when she read the message.

"What!?"

Yuuko described her near abduction by L'Isle-Adams and that Hiroshi had rescued and hidden her.

Junko glanced over at the news broadcast playing on her room's monitor. It said rebels had attacked the palace . It was obvious those rebels were the priest of the different gods.

—*That means… It can't be!*

She opened her dorm room window for the first time in a while and looked outside. The city was clearly different from before. L'Isle-Adams in knight uniforms were walking around and telling people to stay indoors.

"How can this be…?"

Junko shuddered and looked back at the email. She did not want to think about it, but the email would have made her a top priority target for observation. Yuuko had realized this fact, so the email ended with the following:

<If you manage to reach the place I brought you in fifth grade, we can manage something.>

Someone else reading the email would not know where that was.

But a problem remained: how could Junko get there while the city was under martial law? Currently, she was a normal high school girl with no combat ability.

"Think, think. If I stay here, someone will come to arrest me," said Junko. "Try to stay calm."

Junko was Yuuko's sister and had been close to Akuto, so she would have been abducted by the L'Isle-Adams sooner or later even without the email. Junko had been overlooked so far because Korone had likely informed Zero of her loss of willpower. However, she would not get off so easily now that Yuuko had grown rebellious.

Junko closed the window, grabbed her sword, and walked out into the hallway. However, she was too late in more ways than one. She saw a L'Isle-Adam knight walking through the hallway. She turned the other way, but found another knight there.

"Kh…"

Junko returned to her room and reopened the window.

—*Can I jump down?*

Her room was on the third floor. She would have been fine back when she could use mana, but now there was no way.

She heard the door behind her open.

She had no choice.

—*I have to jump!*

Junko climbed over the windowsill. She did not feel like she was floating as she once had. A sense of falling chilled her entire body.

"Kyaaaah!"

She could not control her position. She had trouble even keeping her feet below her.

—*Am I…going to die?*

That thought floated up in the back of her mind.

—*Akuto!*

She desperately sought his name and his image.

And suddenly she felt as if her body was being held.

—*Is this an illusion? No, this is real! It can't be!*

"Akuto!" she cried as she opened her eyes.

"Sorry, but I'm not aniki."

He was not being sarcastic and he was not complaining. Hiroshi sounded truly apologetic. Junko realized Hiroshi was wearing his suit and flying while holding her.

"Oh, it's you."

"That's a bit mean, class rep. I did save your life, y' know?"

"Sorry. You did. Did Yuuko ask you to do this?"

Junko breathed a sigh of relief.

While still holding Junko, Hiroshi flew well up in the sky so the L'Isle-Adams could not pursue them.

"That's right. Let's get to where Yuuko-chan is waiting ."

"Is that the amusement park in Asakusa?"

"Yes. There is a good hideout there, so I had her hide there for now."

"Thanks. But wasn't this rebellion a bit rushed? Couldn't you have done something better? I hear Zero cannot kill people, so couldn't you have used a more moderate method?" asked Junko.

Hiroshi shook his head.

"It was rushed. But because Zero can't kill, he instead abducts people and brainwashes them."

Junko felt a chill run along her back.

"Really? Then what do we do now? It might already be too late. The entire empire is under Zero's control."

"I am… No, this form of mine is still viewed as the savior that defeated the demon king." Hiroshi spoke his determination with a serious expression. "So I want to defeat as many L'Isle-Adams as I can, protect everyone, and make a call for action. I'll tell people to defeat Zero. I will prove that we can defeat this control over us if each individual person resolves themselves!"

Hiroshi's words sounded promising. It was true that there was no other method if Zero could not kill humans. However, Junko still felt as if something was a bit off.

"Are you sure that is the way to do this? I…I feel like that is somehow wrong," muttered Junko.

However, Hiroshi shook his head.

"If we defeat Zero, this will all be over."

"Yes… I suppose so," said Junko.

However, her nagging feeling was not gone. Finally, she realized where it came from.

—*Akuto would not do this. But what would he do?*

"Kazuko-sama!"

Yoshie quickly straightened her posture. However, she was the only one to do so. Due to her faith, Fujiko had no intention of showing courtesy toward the empress. Akuto and Keena acted the same around anyone, so of course the same held true here.

However, both Akuto and Fujiko sensed a sort of majesty about Kazuko.

Her mere presence seemed to change the atmosphere.

She was certainly beautiful, but it had more to do with the uniqueness of her smile. One look at it and they felt as if that smile must never be erased.

Fujiko was desperately trying to suppress a desire to bow down before her. Kazuko may have sensed that

because she waved a hand, said “as you were”, and sat at the tea table.

“Please make yourselves comfortable. There is a lot I must explain. Oh, Issei-san, could I have some tea? Also, bring me you know what.”

Issei stood up and pulled a tea tray and a small jar from the shelf.

“Here.”

Issei held out a filled teacup. Kazuko took it with both hands, took a sip, and smiled.

“Delicious.”

Without exaggeration, Akuto and the others felt blessed to have seen that smile. As proof, no one there spoke a word despite having countless questions.

“Tea is not complete without this. Nanko-ume from Kishu.”

Kazuko opened the jar and pulled out a dried plum. She elegantly brought the large plum to her mouth and gave a superb smile.

"Ah, so very delicious."

Her expression was so calm that one would have thought the dried plum was not sour at all. That expression told everyone she was the other "Single Food Obsessed" that Issei had mentioned. In other words, Kazuko had been here for a while.

"You're going to explain this, aren't you?" asked Akuto.

Kazuko turned to Issei and nodded.

"Understood," replied Issei with a bow. "To keep it short, my duty is to guard the secrets of black magic. In other words, I'm the elder."

"You're the great elder!?"

Fujiko was at a loss for words.

"The black magicians' elder?" asked Akuto and Fujiko explained.

"It is a legend spoken of in rumors between black magicians. There is supposedly an elder who guards the secrets of true black magic. However, I had assumed it was just a rumor because no one had ever seen him."

"Yes. And the secrets of course refer to the demon king ," said Issei as he stood up.

He opened the door to the room and urged everyone to head in. Everyone followed Issei and Kazuko through the door.

The door should have led to the warehouse, but they found themselves in a strangely decorated room.

"This isn't an alternate dimension, so were we transferred here?" muttered Akuto.

"Yes. This is where you were born," said Issei casually.

However, it was a shocking statement for Akuto.

"Wha-!?"

He looked around.

The room looked like a laboratory. It was about as large as a classroom and a transparent cylindrical case sat in the center. Tubes and cables extended from it and were connected to a panel with a console.

"The demon king is both human and not human," said Kazuko. "I must begin with the very first. As you know, the first demon king was Zero. Long ago, mankind's knowledge created an artificial intelligence known as Zero. However, Zero realized that mankind wished for destruction. To ensure mankind was not destroyed, Zero tried to brainwash all of mankind and become one with them. Mankind fought to stop him and that is what we know as the first demon king war. The same thing is happening now. During the first demon king war, not many L'Isle-Adams existed, so mankind managed to win . However, they failed in their development of a new artificial intelligence, so they were unable to abandon Zero. Zero was a miracle. To this day, it is not known how Zero obtained his own intelligence.

"Mankind then created the gods based on Zero. To create the gods, data on human thoughts was gathered and those thoughts were appropriated to give the gods the same thought pattern as humans. That allowed them to exist without going insane like Zero. Perhaps a perfect

artificial intelligence will naturally go insane. Perhaps an intelligence can only maintain sanity with the contradictory thoughts of a human. The gathered human thought data is the same as the current life logs. All of the electric currents in a baptized human's brain is saved and added to the gods' thought patterns. However, the gods reached the conclusion that mankind must be destroyed for the sake of their evolution. It was for a different reason than with Zero, but they too concluded that mankind had to eventually be destroyed.

"The gods did not immediately try to destroy mankind , so the research into their conclusion was kept secret. They then reached another conclusion: a true god might exist. That is to say, the creator worshiped in the religions of the past. And it seems the gods have reason to believe this true god created a 'sense of self' that ' makes humans human'. The researchers named this ' sense of self' the Law of Identity and began to view it as one and the same as the supposed true god. You can think of this as religious faith in the truest sense of the word. They believed a human in which god resided would be born periodically. You could call it reincarnation. And the holders of this belief were the first black magicians. This belief was their motive for creating the demon king. They created a being with the ability

needed to destroy mankind. The demon king is both human and not human. He is a true artificial human who is created by injecting mana into an ovum."

That last sentence was a true shock for Akuto.

"That's what I am…?"

Keena and Fujiko silently pressed up against him.

Even as she watched them, Kazuko's smile did not disappear. And then she gave a warning.

"Reality is reality. It is for your own good if you accept this quickly."

"I-is that any way to talk to him? This was a big shock for A-chan," protested Keena.

However, Kazuko only tilted her head while still smiling.

"Oh? But if he does not know the truth, he cannot deal with what is to come."

"But…!"

Keena began to complain, but Akuto stopped her.

"Thanks, but I do feel as if I have to hear the rest."

"A-chan…"

Keena backed off.

Kazuko smiled and nodded.

"I see the demon king understands. Now, let us continue. The Law of Identity – that is, the real god – may be nothing more than a belief. In other words, it has never been confirmed that the Law of Identity exists. It may be completely meaningless and not even exist. What matters is that our gods – the gods created from advanced artificial intelligences – believe in the Law of Identity as a religious god. Funny, isn't it?"

No one but Kazuko laughed, but she continued on calmly as if that did not bother her.

"To put it simply, the demon king is the ultimate weapon humans have created. It is nothing more or less than that. You can use all of the magic power moving within the empire. If you awaken, that is."

"It can't be!" cried Akuto.

None of this contradicted what Bouichirou had told him and he understood that the gods were complicit with the demon king. However, he had never thought he could unconditionally use so much power if he awakened. And this raised another question: had he not truly awakened while Peterhausen was with him?

"But the black magicians created Peterhausen so that the world could use magic equally!"

Akuto raised a desperate protest as if to say he did not want his own existence to be meaningless.

However, Kazuko's answer as blunt.

"If Peterhausen were here, I could prove you can use all magic. The original black magicians were all killed because of that danger. Well, all except for their elder. The later black magicians only had scattered data on the original ones. That was when belief in equality became their foundation and when they become nothing more than a group of hackers."

"The elder wasn't killed?" asked Akuto.

A frightening thought had come to him. Picking up on that fact, Kazuko grinned.

"Yes. It was of course the historical emperor who left the elder alive and therefore left behind the techniques needed to create the demon king."

"…!"

Fujiko had grown completely pale.

"Then everything we have done was-…!"

"It was not meaningless. However, the empress and the elder knew the answer you sought. The moderates and radicals in the government did not, though. After all, the empress does not take part in politics."

Kazuko's smile remained unchanged. It was as if she had no interest in Akuto and the others' emotions.

However, Akuto sensibly picked up on the meaning behind their meeting here.

"Then it was no coincidence we met here. You predicted we would find our way here."

Kazuko nodded and gave a small clap.

"Yes, excellent. This generation's demon king is sharp. I was driven from the palace, so I have come to borrow your power."

"Borrow my power?"

"The one in the palace is not me; it is my twin sister 2V . She used Zero to usurp the palace and the empire based on a personal grudge. You will of course assist me in retaking the empire, won't you?"

Kazuko tilted her head cutely, but Akuto said nothing.

"Oh, right. I forgot to explain everything. Most likely, the only person who can defeat Zero and 2V is you once you awaken as the demon king. That is why I am asking you."

Kazuko once more tilted her head and Akuto spoke quietly this time.

"Once I awaken?"

"Yes. Oh, dear. I haven't explained that either. I said the demon king can use all of the gods' power, right?

That magic power comes from the life logs of people in the past. Think of it like this: the more people's thought data those logs contain, the more processing speed you have. Awakening means you are able to use all of that. Yes, let's make this very simple: the more people die, the stronger you become. That is why the demon king's power continues to grow without end."

Kazuko laughed.

"My power is that abominable?" muttered Akuto.

"Is it really? It depends on how you think about it. You do not grow stronger only from those who die cruelly and you personally have done nothing wrong."

"But once I awaken, my power will have no restrictions, right?"

"That is correct. You have the power to either destroy the world or save it. You can do one or the other on a whim. However, that is obviously not a good thing. So let me say it again: serve your empress."

Kazuko reached her hand out toward Akuto.

Hiroshi had carried Junko to the roof of an amusement park haunted house. She and Yuuko were sitting behind a sign that could easily hide a few people.

"Yuuko, is Hiroshi really going to fight?" asked Junko.

Hiroshi had flown off as soon as he lowered Junko to the roof.

"It seems so. And it seems he has to because of what I did…"

Yuuko seemed to regret what she had done.

"Then should you really be sitting here?"

"If I did anything, it would only be a burden. I don't like it, but there's nothing I can do. And I don't even know if there's anything I could do even if I did have some power."

Junko recalled what she had heard not long ago.

Hiroshi had said he would use his reputation to have the people stand up and fight.

—But will it really all be over once Zero is defeated? What will remain after the people stand up? Won't the hero be left all alone?

"Yuuko, you do need to do something. When a guy says he is going to do something reckless, his comrades cannot leave him alone." Even as she spoke, Junko felt as if she were speaking to herself. "Even ignoring romantic feelings, I think knowing how to do that can be tricky, but anyone will collapse if they do not have someone to provide unconditional support. Even if they succeed and even if everyone celebrates their actions, it is all conditional. Once they fail, everyone will leave them. In that case, don't they need someone who will do something for them unconditionally?"

Yuuko nodded in response.

"I think I know what you mean, but you make it sound like you know what's going to happen with Hiroshi-kun."

"I wonder why that is. I do feel like I understand. I have an ominous feeling about what is to come and it

will not go away. It feels like all of this is playing right into someone's hand. And I get the feeling Hiroshi is one of the important pieces."

"I know why you would feel uneasy, but I hope that feeling is just because we're on top of a haunted house," said Yuuko cheerfully.

Junko smiled too.

"You were the one that insisted on going inside back then, but you were the one that ended up in tears."

"Really? Maybe my dislike of demonic beasts isn't just because of the blood that got mixed in," said Yuuko in surprise.

"Now, what is Hiroshi doing?"

Junko checked the news broadcast on her student handbook. It was in the middle of a report.

The newscaster was repeatedly emphasizing the switchover to martial law. That meant a lot of people had entered the streets. The cause was displayed on the monitor behind the newscaster.

<The mysterious hero who once defeated the demon king has appeared once more. However, he is now a villain disrupting peace and order. He is slaughtering knights and calling for the people to rebel against their empire,> stated the newscaster expressionlessly.

"They're reporting lies," said Yuuko with a displeased look.

"But that newscaster is not a L'Isle-Adam. Something might change," said Junko.

And her guess proved correct.

<We have footage coming in from all over the place. The power-hungry members of the old system – that is, the priests – are starting rebellions all over. We must ask that no one approaches these dangerous areas,> plainly repeated the newscaster.

However, the footage coming from a local reporter seemed to have Hiroshi's call to arms mixed in. His voice could just barely be heard coming from the many small monitors behind the newscaster. The volume was lowered so the viewers were unable to make out his words, but everyone in the news station could hear it.

The newscaster's tone of voice suddenly changed.

<No, I will now tell you the truth. That hero is no rebel . Nor are the people who have stood up. The only ones who have usurped power are the L'Isle-Adams and Zero who controls them. Everyone! We too must stand up to defeat them! I am prepared to be fired for saying this! Everyone! Please stand up!>

As the newscaster began shouting, the footage of Hiroshi began playing.

However, it only lasted an instant. The footage was replaced by a blue screen and a pre-recorded program soon began to play. Even so, Junko and Yuuko exchanged a smile.

"They have begun to move."

"Yeah. I wonder what's going to happen. But this means we can act too. Let's go join them."

Yuuko and Junko stood up.

"Yes, but is this really enough to defeat Zero? Even the gods have fallen under Zero's control."

"Eh? Weren't they saying this because they found a way to defeat Zero?" asked Junko in surprise.

"Eh? But if they had something like that, wouldn't they have already done it?"

Yuuko looked puzzled.

That look led Junko to realize her mistake.

"Oh, no… Do not tell me Hiroshi and the others do not know about Keisu."

"Keisu?"

"She is the L'Isle-Adam who once sealed Zero. So that' s it. I just assumed they knew… Okay, there is something we can do. I have seen what Keisu looks like."

Junko felt energy return to her body, but she could not stop the ominous feeling from spreading.

"It's finally begun," said 2V.

The palace's human workers had already fled. 2V had told them to leave. However, busy-looking figures were still moving about the palace. They were of course L' Isle-Adams.

In the end, 2V was alone in that vast palace.

"Are the people attempting to eliminate you?" asked one of the L'Isle-Adams with Zero's voice.

2V nodded.

"Some of them. But I doubt it will go that well. You can bet on it. I will not let them simply defeat me."

Several floating screens showed the priests approaching the palace. Anti-magic weapons sporadically produced flames in the park surrounding the palace. The L'Isle-Adams were being controlled by Zero, so they were unable to kill. In the areas with a concentration of armed priests, the L'Isle-Adams were being destroyed, breaching the defensive line.

"Shouldn't you handle them directly? They will break through if you leave this to the L'Isle-Adams," said Zero.

One screen switched over to footage of people overflowing a road near the palace. The L'Isle-Adams were pushing back against the people packed in like during rush hour, but the people were close to rioting and they showed no sign of breaking up.

"It is not a problem if they break through. In fact, I want them to break through."

2V hopped down from the throne and called over a L' Isle-Adam.

"Now, the real performance begins here."

"What do you mean by 'performance' in this case?" asked Zero.

2V smiled and pointed at the screen.

Brave Hiroshi, the one who had agitated the people and caused the riot, was moving toward the palace. He had not overcome his weakness of being cut off from his energy in the palace grounds, but he had likely thought up some form of countermeasure.

"I will show them my death. That is my goal here. Two things I need for that are not ready, but I have no choice

now that this has progressed so far. Speaking of those two things, how goes the search for Kazuko and Keisu?"

"We should locate Kazuko before long. I have sent a skilled unit," answered Zero. "But are you saying you intend to lose?"

Zero's words were immediately followed by the entire palace shaking.

The trembling in the earth came from the approaching people.

However, 2V gave a fearless smile.

"Lose? Not a chance. This is the beginning. You can get serious now. First, I need you to drag that hero in here. You have permission to use stun sticks and tear gas, " ordered 2V.

"They aren't trying to kill them, but this is still horrible !"

Hiroshi trembled in anger at what he saw below him. Those at the front of the group approaching the palace

lay collapsed in front of the bridge to the palace. As if carving a borderline there, no one could advance beyond that point. L'Isle-Adams wielding stun sticks blocked the way across the bridge.

"I need to finish this within ten minutes of entering that territory…no, I still need energy to attack. It needs to be within three minutes."

Hiroshi looked above the palace. The giant polyhedron which was Zero's body floated there. If he could destroy it, Zero's actions would likely end. That would certainly weaken 2V.

"Should I just charge in?" Hiroshi asked himself. "If I can't finish it in three minutes, it's all over."

"Will you take my hand?" asked Kazuko.

Akuto stared gently back at her.

"I do not see why I need to," he said calmly.

Kazuko laughed.

"Oh, dear. You are right. You have no reason. But you have more power than you know what to do with, do you not? In that case, you have no reason to refuse either. And this empire has been taken by my twin. Would you please defeat her? Surely you can do that."

Akuto understood that reasoning, but he simply did not feel like taking her hand.

"Is that why you were waiting for me here?"

"Yes. I know Zero's power and you are the only one who can oppose him."

Kazuko smiled as if that was only natural. She acted as if all things existed for her sake. However, everyone there understood that was the natural state of affairs for her.

Even so, Akuto turned a sharp glare toward Kazuko.

"Why did you not apologize?"

That question seemed to have been a surprise because Kazuko tilted her head. It appeared she genuinely did not understand the meaning behind the question.

"Apologize? For what?"

"Why did you hide this secret about me…about the empire? That secret has led to so many wars."

Kazuko brought a hand to your mouth and laughed elegantly.

"Ho ho. What a strange thing to ask. The past demon kings have learned their secret and started wars. They have attempted to destroy the very system that created the gods."

"But despite being such a dangerous existence, demon kings continue to be born…no, created by someone."

"Yes. There must always be one in the empire. One must be born every hundred years or so. If not, a bug occurs in the gods' system. Think of it like pus building up that will eventually cause the gods themselves to fail. "

"Then I…"

Akuto trailed off.

If that was true, and it certainly seemed to be, then those known as demon kings had thrown themselves into wars to destroy the system that ruled the world or to protect those who controlled the system. Either way, it was a war which left nothing after victory. However, that was not destiny. They had not been predestined to do that; they had undoubtedly chosen it themselves.

"I can be myself, right?" muttered Akuto.

"What do you mean by that? You are the demon king. You are an unstable existence with tremendous power. In which case, you should remain under my control where-…"

Akuto cut Kazuko off.

"No. I am me. I will decide who I am."

Akuto looked directly at Kazuko.

"Do you have what it takes to do that? Can you take responsibility for an entire nation? You can't, can you?" she asked while her smile never wavered.

However, Akuto shook his head.

"No, but I have them."

He looked at Keena.

He looked at Fujiko.

He looked at Yoshie.

And he looked at Junko, Korone, and Hiroshi even if they were not present.

"I am the man who loves those girls. I am me."

Keena and the others said nothing, but they stared steadily at Akuto.

"Then are you saying you will not obey your empire?" asked Kazuko.

"This is a deal. I will defeat 2V and Zero like you want, but keep your hands off my heart."

Kazuko smiled and nodded.

"Ho ho. How interesting. Fine then."

Kazuko began to say more and took a step toward Akuto.

But a thin thread of light cut across the room.

It pierced Akuto's back and shot out his chest.

"Eh…?"

Akuto stopped moving.

Blood began flowing from his chest.

"A-A-chan!"

"Akuto-sama!"

"That was a laser!"

Keena, Fujiko, and Yoshie all cried out.

Akuto brought a hand to his chest, looked at the blood covering his palm, and gave a look of disbelief. He then turned in the direction the beam of light had come from.

"Korone!"

Korone stood there holding a beam weapon.

Akuto's face twisted in shock and sorrow while Korone stared back at him with an expressionless look that lacked even iciness.

"I thought the beam would reach Kazuko after piercing through you, but it seems your body really is solid. However, the demon king was a target as well, so this was two birds with one stone. Please do not get in the way of my next shot. Killing Kazuko has higher priority than killing the demon king."

Korone spoke coolly as she aimed the beam weapon. Akuto staggered to the side and Kazuko became visible behind him.

"Not good!"

Issei had remained silent so far, but he now reached a hand toward the room's floor. The entire room began to glow.

"A transfer circle!" exclaimed Fujiko upon realizing what it was.

It seemed magic had been prepared so everyone within the room could be transferred and Issei had just activated it.

Akuto, Issei, Kazuko, and the girls who rushed over to Akuto all began to disappear. However, Korone swiftly slid over to the transfer circle, pulled a transfer circle creator from her bag, and quickly activated it over the original circle.

“This will make your transfer incomplete. Namely, this transfer will lead to the location I indicate,” said Korone.

“Oh, no. How fast can she be!?” shouted Issei.

Issei and the others completely vanished and Korone followed soon after.

They appeared a moment later in a forest.

Akuto was surrounded by Keena and the other two girls. Kazuko stood before him and Issei was a short distance away. Korone retained her position further away still.

"It seems you tried to escape, but you were much too slow. And you will have difficulty escaping from this forest without transferring yourselves," said Korone.

"K-Korone," said Akuto as he unsteadily rose to his feet.

"Please do not stand between Kazuko and myself."

Korone aimed the beam weapon.

"Korone-chan, stop!" screamed Keena, but Korone remained as expressionless as ever.

"Stop, Korone! Don't shoot! I can forget what you did to me, but I can't let you kill a human being."

Akuto staggered toward Korone.

"The demon king is not human and neither is the empress. Farewell," said Korone.

"Stop!"

Akuto gathered his strength and charged toward Korone. He practically embraced the beam weapon to move it away from Kazuko, and he looked over his shoulder and shouted out.

"Run!"

But Kazuko only tilted her head curiously.

"Run?"

"Yes, ru-…"

"I thought I told you to stay out of the way."

Korone used her physical strength to twist the beam weapon beneath Akuto's body. She pressed the muzzle against his stomach.

"A-chan!"

Keena began to run over to Akuto, but a moment later, a beam of light shot out Akuto's back.

"…!"

Keena let out a voiceless scream.

Akuto's body collapsed downwards and Korone casually brushed him aside.

"Gh…" he groaned as he collapsed to the ground.

He was still breathing.

"A-chan!"

"Akuto-sama!"

Keena and Fujiko ran over to Akuto. Yoshie trembled and did not move.

However, Kazuko continued to look toward Akuto with a curious look.

"Why did you tell me to run?" she asked.

Her tone was just as puzzled as her expression.

Akuto replied with blood flowing from his mouth.

"Because just like me, you bear a power you were born with… I tried to protect you…because I once had a comrade like that… A friend who knew my identity yet still accompanied me in my selfish conflict and died for me with a smile on his lips…" said Akuto with a groan.

"A-chan, don't speak…"

Keena helped Akuto up.

"Ahh, if Akuto-sama only awakened, this wound would mean nothing," said Fujiko bitterly.

She was using healing magic on Akuto, but it was having little to no effect.

Akuto's face could be seen growing paler by the moment. He looked at Keena and seemed to smile, but his head hung down limply.

His body went limp in Keena's hands.

"A-chan!"

"Akuto-sama!"

The two girls cried out and desperately clung to his body as if that would bring him back to life.

Korone on the other hand merely glanced over at Akuto's corpse and walked past him.

"How very disappointing. The empress is not someone worth dying to protect."

Korone stared directly at Kazuko, but Kazuko only smiled.

She seemed to be enjoying this.

"Ho ho ho. Very true. He should not have protected me."

"So you admit the empress is a worthless existence? In that case, you should not mind if I kill you."

Korone held up her beam weapon.

"That is not what I meant," said Kazuko.

"?"

"I do not need protection."

Kazuko swung her hands and several mana spheres danced about her body.

"Black magic!"

Korone took a cautious step back, but Kazuko surprisingly moved forward after her.

"This is not black magic. The Yasakani no Magatama is a secret technique of the imperial family."

Kazuko's hands danced about. The mana spheres danced in response and attacked Korone.

"Unknown attack pattern. Evading only closest activation!"

Korone twisted her body, but an irregularly activated mana sphere dug into her.

"…! Impossible to evade?"

The mana sphere moved as if clinging to Korone's body. Despite being unable to pick up much momentum, it was still able to do damage.

"I will continue dancing until I die and you will continue dancing even after your death. That is how this secret technique works."

Kazuko laughed as she danced. Korone may have been a L'Isle-Adam, but it seemed she was unable to withstand the damage. She swiftly opened her bag and threw her own body inside.

"Oh?"

Kazuko's eyes opened in surprise.

Korone was sucked feet first into the bag. Once everything but a hand had disappeared inside, that hand drew a transfer circle in the air and the bag was sucked inside that circle.

"Quite a skilled L'Isle-Adam."

Kazuko smiled and turned toward Keena who was crying.

"I see he has died," said Kazuko.

Keena looked up at her while crying.

"Wh-what are we supposed to do?"

Meanwhile, Fujiko was unable to hide her anger with Kazuko.

"This was your fault."

"Oh? I do not believe it had anything to do with me. He himself said his actions were due to that dead friend of his."

When Kazuko mentioned that friend, she pointed at Keena's chest.

"F-fweh?"

As Keena cried, she realized her chest was glowing.

"Wh-what is this? …Pe-chan?"

She pulled out the necklace that hung below her clothes and the light suddenly grew brighter. Peterhausen's fang was glowing.

"Pe-chan…"

The existence Akuto had called a friend had responded to his feelings and was now trying to tell them something.

"Is this…?"

Keena gently embraced Peterhausen's fang and closed her eyes.

She then nodded as if something was talking to her.

"Wh-what is it?" hesitantly asked Fujiko.

Keena opened her eyes.

"He says there's a way to bring A-chan back to life…"

"What!?" shouted Fujiko in surprise.

"The Lord of the Underworld's Coffin," said Kazuko. " That is the name of the device that can resurrect the demon king. It is also the device to bring about his awakening."

"Why does something like that exist?" asked Yoshie.

She had been too overwhelmed to speak before, but she finally managed to squeeze out those words.

"There have been many different demon kings in the past. Some of them have been mentally immature, so the demon king is given a few different trials. That is likely what it is. You could call it a safety measure," replied Kazuko.

"Then is it possible he will not wake up?"

"Yes. Some have died while trying to awaken. Now, let us go. I have been waiting for this."

"Waiting?" asked Fujiko as she turned toward Kazuko.

"Yes." Kazuko smiled. "I have been waiting for a demon king who will work for the empire."

Chapter 4: The Very Last Demon King

"When you were in the virtual alternate dimension, you saw the L'Isle-Adam used to seal Zero?" asked Yuuko.

Junko and Yuuko had left the closed amusement park and spoke as they travelled. Asakusa was not too far from the palace to travel by foot, but Junko insisted they find Keisu first.

"Yes. She was a short girl with a long sword on her back, she wore Japanese-style clothes like a Suhara follower, and her hair was tied back."

Junko explained Keisu's appearance and Yuuko looked confused.

"Zero knows she has that power, right? So why hasn't she been caught if she stands out that much? The L' Isle-Adams are monitoring everywhere, aren't they?"

"Yes, and Zero would have been able to check the old documents to find where Keisu had originally been."

That was only a conjecture on Junko's part, but it would not be too far off from the truth.

"Then won't she have already been caught?"

"No. We know she was originally in the Temple of Megis, but there have not been any reports from there, have there?"

"Well, no…"

"Keisu will not be far from there. If she has the power to seal Zero, she may have the power to hide herself from him."

"Then where is she?"

Yuuko looked puzzled, but Junko had realized a certain possibility.

"The Temple of Megis had to have been sealed off right away, so there should not be anyone inside."

"She's still in there!" shouted Yuuko.

They could not use magic and the public institutions were not running, so the two sisters were forced to head to the city center by foot.

The ground vehicles were not running, so people were walking on the roads. The knights were not present because they had gone to the palace, but fortunately, no one was looting.

"It looks like people are gathering at the palace."

Strangers called out to each other to inform them of that fact. Not even their handheld devices were receiving the news, so they began walking toward the center of the capital just like Junko and Yuuko.

As they approached the center, the roads grew crowded. When they arrived at the Temple of Megis, the area in front of it was as crowded as a flying train platform during rush hour.

Even so, no one was actually trying to force their way into the temple. They would walk through the vast stone-paved entrance area and reach the large glass door, but it was of course locked.

"What should we do?" asked Yuuko.

"We can circle around back," answered Junko. "Last time I was here, there was a door with a flimsy-looking lock there."

Junko's dangerous-sounding comment proved partly accurate. There was a back gate, but it did not look particularly flimsy.

"That doesn't look very flimsy…" said Yuuko just as Junko kicked the gate.

With a dull sound, the gate's supporting pillar bent and the lock came out of its base.

"They do not put very much money into building the temples," explained Junko.

"I see…"

Yuuko opened the broken gate by hand and it creaked rustily.

That large empty building had a unique atmosphere to it. It felt somehow chilly and their footsteps echoed loudly. The Temple of Megis even had a small shopping mall inside, so they felt very alone inside.

"It might be tough finding someone in here."

"Yes, you're right."

Junko began to think. It would take quite a bit of time to do a thorough search, so she needed to come up with some locations Keisu was likely to be.

"She did not seem very smart, so let's check up above, " said Junko.

"Up above?"

"Even in the virtual artificial dimension, she descended from the top of a mountain and I doubt she was there from the beginning. She might be the type who always heads upwards. Like smoke."

"That's a mean thing to say about someone you barely know."

"Yes, but something about her makes you take her lightly."

Junko folded her arms.

They pressed the button to ride the elevator to the top floor. A sign informed them there was a cafeteria that overlooked the city there.

"If she really is stupid, that's where she'll be," said Yuuko as she pointed toward the cafeteria.

"Yes," agreed Junko.

They got off at the top floor, walked through the comfortably vast space, and made their way to the cafeteria. As they approached, they heard the clattering of dishes.

"Don't tell me…"

They were in trouble if this was someone dangerous, so they held their breath and peered inside.

Someone was crouched over one of the tables and eating. They were so short that they had to stand in the chair rather than sit. They carried an overly long sword on their back.

"It is safe. This is her," said Junko.

She stepped out from behind cover and into the cafeteria.

Keisu heard her movement and turned around.

She frowned in confusion when she saw Junko, but clapped her hands together when she recognized her.

“Oh! You are the girl I met recently, aren’t you?”

Keisu had no sense of the danger she could have been in. The table was covered with fried foods. She had clearly fried up a lot of the food stored in the freezer.

“Why are you happily eating here? “

“I can never turn down a korokke. At any rate, it seems the world has changed a lot. I cannot believe there is no one in the temple. I was beginning to get lonely.”

“Are you stupid? Zero was resurrected, so the priests were sent home and put under house arrest. And surely the L’Isle-Adams checked inside here,” said Junko.

Keisu narrowed her eyes belligerently.

“I thought I told you I do not like being called stupid.”

"This is no time for that. I apologize for the wording I used, but Zero has been resurrected. How do we seal him ?" asked Junko quickly.

"By Zero, do you mean the demon king?" asked Keisu with a tilt of her head. "I may not be the smartest, but I would not be sitting around eating if the demon kind had been revived."

"You are aware you are not all that smart? …Anyway, Zero really has been revived."

"I do not understand why you would claim that. I have a mana link with the demon king you refer to as Zero. If he had revived, I would know," said Keisu proudly.

"In that case, why have all the L'Isle-Adams been taken over? I thought that was Zero's power."

"Oh, that is Zero's normal power. He has yet to fully revive."

"What?"

"Once he revives, all humans will be under his direct control. The gods put some of their mana inside people

during the ceremony known as baptism, correct? He should be able to use that to control humans just like he controls the L'Isle-Adams."

"He can do that?"

Keisu had said it so casually, but the idea was so repulsive and terrifying that Junko shuddered. However, Keisu nodded without noticing her reaction.

"He cannot control your mind, of course. But he can make you apathetic, make you do things you do not wish to do, and otherwise control your actions in general. Zero believes that humans require absolute protection, so his ideal society would be one in which humans do absolutely nothing. Zero's goal is to stop all human activity."

That knowledge must have been installed in Keisu because she explained it all without hesitation.

"Then why is he only controlling the L'Isle-Adams for now?"

"I do not know. Most likely, someone is controlling Zero and this person is preventing him from doing any more."

"Then if 2V is defeated…"

Junko felt sweat dripping down her spine.

"Come with us! We need to seal Zero again!" shouted Junko.

"I can never forgive you."

Fujiko turned a murderous glare toward Issei.

His expression grew serious and he did not smile for once.

"Humans have their beliefs. Not even the black magicians were able to escape religious belief," he said in a truly dry voice.

"Are you saying the black magicians who wanted to bring about a free society had their own religious belief?"

"Yes. It was the idea that the demon king would save them and bring them that freedom. Pointing that belief towards the gods was a good system. When it comes down to it, humans need a story to believe in, even if it's

completely worthless. Reality is filled with worthless things. In a truly equal society, everyone would have the power of the demon king. And if that happened, we would inevitably arrive at a worthless conclusion: we would all kill each other."

Issei looked across everyone there.

Keena embraced Akuto's corpse while Fujiko and Yoshie stood still. Kazuko had already left using transfer magic.

"Then Akuto-sama has no destined mission. He is simply someone with the misfortune to end up with that power."

"He probably realized that himself. Given that, what he did here was quite admirable. Now, go and give him that power. But if that power can do nothing but destroy the world, who can say if giving it to him is a good thing or not. I suppose that means we can only hope he chooses not to destroy the world. This is a safety valve someone has to hold. The great power is simply what comes with it."

"Why did you not reveal all this to the public?' asked Fujiko.

Issei gave a snort.

"Hmph. That would only bring war sooner. He was needed to maintain the story. If he's the demon king, then he's the bad guy."

"But…!" shouted Fujiko, but Yoshie placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Let's go. We can discuss this once Akuto-kun wakes up. Or rather, he will make his decision then. I may have only watched him, but I like him. At the very least, I don't want him to die here."

Hearing that, Fujiko took a deep breath, formed a dignified expression, and turned toward Keena.

"Keena, it is time to go. Lead the way."

"I'm not going to act like this makes up for what I did, but I'll transfer you there," said Issei.

"We will not thank you."

"That's fine. Now, where do you need to go?" he asked Keena.

"Roppongi. Other than that, I only know the latitude, longitude, and distance underground. Apparently, there's an old underground facility there. Is that enough?"

"That's plenty."

Issei nodded and began the transfer.

"Also, send me somewhere near the palace," cut in Yoshie.

"You are not going with us?" asked Fujiko.

"I have to look for Keisu," she said with a nod. "If she hasn't been found yet, I bet she's actually still in the Temple of Megis. I doubt I'll be captured if I go to the capital now. Oh, and it won't matter if they can track my location, so I'll send out the footage from my goggles over the internet. You'll probably be able to see it on your devices."

"Understood. Please do."

Fujiko nodded toward Yoshie and Issei.

And Issei produced a transfer circle.

Hiroshi floated in midair, but it did not seem he would have time for a break. An aerial combat formation was ascending toward him.

"But this is the city."

Hiroshi looked around. People were gathering even within the park on the palace's grounds. He would have to shoot down this formation as close to the palace as he could.

—*There are twenty of them.*

He checked the number of enemies and the amount of energy he had left. He had yet to enter the field, so his charge was at one hundred percent. However, he still had to avoid using the high energy weapons that required transfer time after use.

"High frequency blade."

Claws made of a special metal extended from his hand . The claws had their cutting power increased by high frequency vibrations, so he did not lose much energy.

"Hh!"

Hiroshi sliced at a nearby one. His suit could fly faster than his opponent could evade, so he easily cut through it.

"Having to think of where they crash makes this difficult."

Hiroshi watched the sliced wreckage fall, but the enemy formation attacked while his focus was elsewhere. Multiple units flew about with strange trajectories.

"But they're running on a program!"

Hiroshi used his gaze to input a command in the multi-display inside his visor. He had the suit predict the enemy's flight pattern and the suit's voice replied.

"Give me a priority list for attacks. I choose not to use lasers."

<Understood. Pattern recognized. If you react within 0.5 seconds of instruction, you can escape. If you react within 1 second, you can exterminate them. It is recommended you choose extermination.>

"I choose the latter. Tell me what to do!"

<Please attack the target indicated by the pointer. Target #1 is…>

Hiroshi did as instructed and attacked repeatedly while splendidly flying around. The enemy seemed to be following a pattern in which three units attacked at once. A fleeing opponent or a slow opponent would have found that hard to avoid, but its effectiveness was halved against someone who could attack faster than the formation. The combat unit could not target Hiroshi, so it could not fire its bullets or beams. The formation was too slow to react to his movements. This was a simple case of their computers being inferior to the suit's computer.

"I can do this! How many flying units are there? Any reinforcements?"

Hiroshi glanced around after shooting down quite a few of them.

And now that he had the composure to do that, he heard the voices around him.

"Way to go!"

"Our hero!"

"Our courageous hero!"

He realized he had never fought before a large crowd before. Just as Lily had said, those voices brought a sense of responsibility bearing down on him.

—So I have to act as a hero.

The responsibility was heavy, but having so many people cheering for him gave him courage more than anything else. That support was reassuring and it meant that many people were united. He decided to call this justice.

—I'm fighting for the people. I carry their desires and fight for them!

Hiroshi felt as if he had come to understand something important.

He cut through the last unit and checked his remaining energy. He had only lost twenty seconds of flight time. That was no problem.

He looked down and saw a giant polyhedron. It was Zero.

—I don't know how to defeat him, but I can buy some time.

The inside of the polyhedron had been made into a virtual alternate dimension and Zero's program was maintained inside. That meant Zero had no physical form. But if most of the data making up his program was destroyed, he would lose most of his functionality. Akuto had defeated the god Suhara in that same way.

"Let's go. I'll use a plasma ball," commanded Hiroshi.

That was the suit's greatest weapon.

Junko and Yuuko watched Hiroshi fight overhead as they struggled through the crowd. They could not move another step forward. They were about to be buried in the sea of people along with Keisu.

"I give up. I cannot move."

"What are you planning to do at the palace, anyway?" asked Yuuko.

She had a point. Junko could do nothing but watch.

"We still need to get Keisu there."

"I cannot move either," said Keisu.

She was completely buried in the crowd. She was even shorter than Junko, so she was currently grabbing at the hem of Junko's clothes.

"We cannot fly without magic, but what about you?"

"I am not equipped with anything as inelegant as that."

"You can't fly?"

"I do not like being mocked."

"Fine, fine. We can move back a bit and look for another way in."

The three girls began moving back toward the Temple of Megis.

“How do you seal Zero anyway?” asked Yuuko.

Keisu appeared to think for a bit and then made an unexpected announcement.

“I do not remember.”

Meanwhile, Keena, Fujiko, and Akuto’s corpse appeared in a large unknown space.

Technically, it was not completely unknown. They knew its coordinates and depth underground. However, they had no idea what it had been built for. It contained several pillars which were several meters thick and the ceiling was too high to see. Also, a single coffin-like object sat in front of the three of them.

“We are likely the first people in here for hundreds of years,” said Fujiko as she looked around.

The only light was placed around the coffin. The illuminated portion of the stone floor contained no dust. That showed that humans had never been there regularly . If nothing fibrous floated in the air, dust would not gather.

This location had clearly been made solely for the coffin. Most likely, only someone who knew what it was could find this place. It did not look like a facility built for another purpose that had been abandoned. The lack of an entrance or exit was enough to know that.

“I assume this coffin is what we want,” said Fujiko.

Keena was the only one to hear Peterhausen’s voice. It was not his soul because all that remained was the data within the gods, but some kind of connection could be felt in the fact that it only spoke to Keena.

“Don’t worry. This is it,” said Keena.

She begun struggling to place Akuto in the coffin, but he was too heavy for her.

“Here, give me his head. You take his feet.”

Unable to just watch, Fujiko helped.

"Thanks. There we go."

Together, they placed Akuto in the coffin.

The coffin reacted. A mana screen appeared nearby and text scrolled by saying it had activated and what work it was currently doing.

"Is there nothing to do but wait?"

"Looks like it," said Keena.

Fujiko crumbled to a sitting position on the floor.

"Are you okay?" asked Keena.

Fujiko nodded, looked up toward the ceiling, and muttered to herself.

"I cannot help but wonder what I would do if Akuto-sama remains dead… Yet when he died, I controlled myself oddly well even if I did get a bit emotional."

Keena smiled just a bit.

"I felt the same."

"I want him to be revived. I truly do. But…"

"But?"

"Will this really work? Once he revives, will he really be the same person? And once he revives, will he find nothing but pain waiting for him?"

Fujiko was not her normal self. Keena walked over to her and placed her hands on her shoulders.

"A-chan will always be the same person. He won't be anyone else. I'm sure it's the same for everyone born into this world. He can be revived because he was created, but he will still be the same person. Everything will be fine."

She had no proof and it unpleasantly pinpointed the fact that Akuto's ability to be revived made him even more similar to an artificial human, but it still put Fujiko somewhat at ease.

"Yes. I hope everything will be fine. And if Akuto-sama is the same person, he will make the same decisions no matter how many times he is revived."

"Just like before, he'll diligently think about what he should do for society," said Keena with a laugh.

The coffin continued its work, but it gave no sign of how long it would take. Every single second seemed to stretch out forever.

"Will this really work?" asked Fujiko again.

"It will. And if you're anxious, you can pray."

Keena's suggestion sounded ridiculous.

"Pray?" repeated Fujiko in surprise.

"Yes, pray. After all, there's nothing else we can do," said Keena innocently.

"That may be so," said Fujiko with a shake of her head . "But to who? A god? They were already-…"

"There is one…I think. If there isn't one, nothing but pain awaits for A-chan even after this."

Fujiko gasped.

"Yes. I suppose belief may be necessary in that way."

Whether it was the evolution of humanity's belief in the gods or it was the real origin of the human soul, lacking belief in it would render the demon kings' lives meaningless.

Keena kneeled next to the coffin and clasped her hands .

Fujiko closed her eyes and prayed to "something".

The coffin quietly continued its work, but no one there knew what was going to happen.

Yoshie complained when she realized she had not been transferred to the temple.

"Dang it. But maybe it can't be helped. The temple might be shielded. Now where am I?"

She looked around and realized she was in the familiar lobby of the Temple of Megis.

"That makes things a little easier," decided Yoshie as she approached a window and looked out.

She saw a sea of people that could not be described as a mere "crowd".

"Those aren't just onlookers. The wrath of the people sure is scary."

Yoshie fidgeted with her goggles and set the footage it recorded to be automatically broadcast online.

"Come to think of it, this is even more convenient if I' m looking for Keisu."

Just as she was about to turn around, she spotted three people moving in the opposite direction of the crowd. In a crowd like that, someone going against the flow really stood out.

"Fwoh! That's lucky. Are my habits finally paying off?"

The three moving in the opposite direction were Junko, Yuuko, and Keisu. Yoshie had seen Yuuko in various media, so she recognized all three.

She moved to the temple's entrance and beckoned them over.

"Hey, over here. I'm glad I found you so quickly!"

But all of them looked confused.

"Who are you?"

"Do you work for the temple?"

"You seem somehow familiar, but I do not recognize you."

Yoshie remembered she had not used her real form in the virtual alternate dimension.

"It would take a while to explain in detail, so I'll keep it short: I'm Yoshihiko."

None of them seemed to know what she was talking about. The idea of using a different face in the virtual alternate dimension may not have been as obvious to someone unused to crime or trickery because Junko was much slower to catch on than Fujiko had been.

"I'll explain more later, but I'm on Akuto-kun's side. And it is true that I work for the temple. I helped the priests. Oh, there's an emergency floating escape boat we can use to reach the temple. I can explain on the way."

The three still did not seem to get it, but they had grasped that she was not an enemy. She led them to the release lever for the boat. An emergency exit led outside midway through the building and a boat was contained within a case to the side of the exit. It sat six and floated using the repelling force of mana. Pulling a lever released it from its moorings.

"I doubt an enemy would go this far," said Junko while Yoshie pulled the lever, but Junko still seemed to have her doubts.

"Please believe me. I do regret what I did, but I really am Yoshihiko."

That comment only seemed to deepen Junko's caution.

"A-anyway, let's get on the boat," said Yoshie as intense light flashed overhead.

Brave Hiroshi had begun battling Zero's polyhedron.

"Getting too close would be dangerous, but we still need to hurry. And I guess I should bring some kind of weapon."

Yoshie tossed in a chainsaw meant to cut through the metal moorings for an emergency release. She hopped in after it and grabbed an oar coated with a film that let it stir up mana.

The other three climbed aboard and Yoshie began rowing.

"That's the guy who defeated the demon king," she said as she looked up at Brave's battle.

"That's right," said Yuuko without mentioning Hiroshi's identity. "I'm sure he'll manage it this time too. "

"If he defeats Zero, that's fine with me. That's no problem at all. He looks strong, so maybe he can do it," said Yoshie hopefully.

<Transferring heat resistant cape. Transferring plasma balls.>

A cape appeared on Hiroshi's suit and spheres of plasma appeared around it. They were collections of heat that would melt anything that touched them.

Hiroshi accelerated his suit downwards. The instant after passing through the field that prevented any transfers, he had to destroy that polyhedron. This technique would use up his energy and it would take five minutes before he could use the weapon again. He had to finish this in a single blow.

The cape whipped in the wind and the plasma balls began spinning around his body. He looked like a giant drill spinning through the sky.

<Plasma ball fixture field holding. Time from contact to release set at one nanosecond. Anti-flash visor's visible light penetration rate lowered from 23% to less than 1%. Expanding dimensional fault field. Three seconds until contact with target.>

The suit continued its report.

The glittering polyhedron lay directly in front of Hiroshi. It reflected the plasma and glowed an eerie red, but it quickly grew in Hiroshi's vision.

"Go!"

Once almost his entire vision was filled with the polyhedron's reflections, Hiroshi was sure of his victory.

But he was suddenly hit by an intense impact.

He had no idea what had happened, but everyone in the gathered crowd saw it.

An instant before Hiroshi reached it, the polyhedron had moved like a living creature. It had been fixed unmoving in space, but now its entire form bent and flew toward Hiroshi like a bouncing ball.

Plus, it seemed the polyhedron's mirror-like surfaces were covered by some kind of field. Hiroshi realized it had withstood contact with the super-hot plasma. After he recovered from being knocked away, he righted himself in midair.

<The plasma balls were lost after release. The field they came into contact with is thought to be a dimensional fault field.>

"A dimensional fault field…"

That was supposedly future technology only used by this suit. That was how the suit could survive being so near the explosion of the plasma balls.

—Why? …No, the reason doesn't matter. I need to prepare my next attack. …It isn't going to use "that", is it!?

Hiroshi tried to calm his tense mind so he could think. He ascended away from the polyhedron, but he carefully did so in reverse so as not to turn his back to it.

What Hiroshi referred to as “that" was the dimensional slice. That was another piece of future technology that Yamato Bouichirou had once used. It most likely functioned on the same principle.

And his guess was correct. The polyhedron opened one of its triangular faces outwards and a rainbow-colored beam shot straight up from the opening.

“Kh…!”

Hiroshi evaded it. The space he had been in a moment earlier slid out of place. It was as if the sky itself had been sliced with a utility knife.

“How much energy do I have left?”

Hiroshi checked his remaining energy out of the corner of his eye. He could not use any weapons, but he could open a field to block the transfer of Zero’s attack.

"A bit over four minutes left," he muttered under his breath.

And once Zero saw Hiroshi could evade the attack, he changed his attack method. The polyhedron opened all of its faces outwards. It changed shape to a surprising extent like an origami figure being transformed with more folds. The polyhedron transformed into what looked like two plates pressed together and began to spin like a flying saucer. It flew toward Hiroshi like that.

"Analyze pattern."

<Its physical ability is equal to this suit's. It is recommended you transfer control over to the suit. Voice instructions after analysis will not be fast enough.>

"Give control to the suit," said Hiroshi.

The suit forcibly moved Hiroshi's body and carried out unpredictable movements at blinding speed. However, Zero's flying saucer did the same. Zero also intermittently fired dimensional slices. The two objects moved at speeds no human could keep up with as they flew through the air while space continually slid out of place due to the slices.

—Even if I can avoid it, I can't attack after four minutes if I don't have control!

Hiroshi began to panic. Not only could he not attack, but keeping his movements at the limit like this was lowering his energy reserves more quickly then it could be resupplied.

—Should I flee?

Weakness entered his heart.

But then he heard voices from below.

It was a great earthquake-like roar rising into the air.

The crowd was cheering him on.

"Brave! Brave!"

They were calling his name.

—What…!?

Heat filled his chest.

—Not yet! I haven't hit the limit yet! I can keep at it until I run out of energy!

"Brave! Brave!"

The crowd filling the roads around the palace had to number in the tens of thousands. As far as the eye could see, the area was crammed full of people and they were all cheering on Brave in his predicament in the sky above . Their voices were so loud one had to cover their ears to withstand it. The volume was enough to shake Junko and the others' bodies as they rode the boat low in the air.

But Junko was staring blankly at Yoshie. Yoshie had explained it several times and Junko had finally realized the truth.

"You are Yoshihiko…"

"I'm sorry. That's why I didn't think it was a big deal for you to strip down," apologized Yoshie while looking up at Brave's battle.

Yuuko and Keisu were focused on watching the battle as well, but Junko lowered her head.

—*Th-then…*

When Akuto had said "once we get back to the real world, you should spend the day with her at least once" to Yoshihiko, he had been speaking to Yoshie. And when Junko thought back, she remembered them saying something about having a different appearance from reality.

—*I was so worried about something that trivial?*

Junko began laughing at the ridiculousness of it.

"Wait. Are you okay?"

Yoshie seemed worried, but she spread her arms to say she was fine.

"There is no problem. …I see. With that in mind, I think we can get along. You act quite differently than you did there, though."

"Yeah, I ended up like that when I tried to act like a guy. Girls like that apparently. But enough about that. I need to tell you about Akuto-kun."

Yoshie went on to tell Junko how that journey had ended.

Junko's expression grew more and more serious as the story progressed.

"So can he be revived?"

"We don't know yet. We can only wait."

Yoshie shook her head, but Yuuko pointed up into the sky.

"Everything will be fine if you wait," she said. "And Brave will finish everything before he gets here."

Yuuko may have been right. Junko had a feeling Akuto would arrive in a situation like this, but Hiroshi seemed to hold that position for Yuuko. And he was currently being cheered on by almost the entire imperial capital.

"A hero, hm?" muttered Junko.

In that instant, he truly was a hero.

And then the decisive moment arrived.

Light shot up into the sky from below. It was a mana sphere. It flew from the palace and was deflected by the surface of Zero's flying saucer. Someone who could still use magic was assisting Brave.

"Someone can still use magic?"

"Who is it?"

Yoshie and Junko could only ask those questions, but Brave did not overlook the opening.

—Someone attacked from below?

Hiroshi questioned it for an instant, but it did not matter who it was. All that mattered was that it created an opening.

—How much energy do I have left?

He could attack once with the monomolecular wire.

"Transfer control to me! Wire!" ordered Hiroshi.

At the same time, he shot by the side of Zero's flying saucer.

The wire he fired from his hand appeared to simply fly gently through the air, but Zero's flying saucer sliced splendidly down the middle an instant later.

"Did I do it?"

Hiroshi turned around.

He did not have enough energy for another weapon. He could not move at high speed either.

But he did not need to. After being sliced in two, the flying saucer tried to return to the polyhedron but failed. Its triangular parts scattered and fell to the ground.

"I won! It's over!"

An indescribable feeling of satisfaction filled his body.

He heard the pieces of the polyhedron falling to the palace below, but another noise soon drowned that out.

It was of course the people shouting the name Brave.

"Yes!"

Yuuko let out a cheer and clapped her hands.

"Hoo… So it's over."

Junko let out a sigh of relief.

"Well, this resolution is fine too."

Yoshie stopped rowing the boat. They had arrived at the outer wall of the palace. The crowd had climbed over the wall and entered the palace's front yard, but the girls could see what was happening in the temple from their position.

Keisu then looked up in the air and then cautiously to either side.

"What is it?" asked Yoshie.

"He isn't dead," said Keisu quickly.

"Eh?"

"Zero isn't dead," she insisted.

She could likely sense it.

"We know he can't be completely deactivated, but that isn't what you mean, is it?" asked Yoshie worriedly.

"I don't know the details," answered Keisu with a shake of her head.

But before Yoshie could ask another question, an obvious answer arrived.

"Zero's rule and ambition have been eliminated," announced a sudden voice.

It was audible over the praise of Brave, so it could not have been a normal voice. It was being amplified magically and it of course came from the palace.

The person who stepped out on to the palace's terrace was *Kazuko*.

The people's cheers grew. The girl's image was projected large in the sky so even those in the distance could see her.

"Valiant warrior, I do not know who you are, but you have given us all the courage to fight. It touched me as well. That is why I fired magic on Zero."

The Kazuko speaking to the crowd was of course 2V.

"Oh, no…"

"It cannot be! She is taking it this far!?"

Yoshie and Junko recognized 2V, so they knew that was who this was.

"Where is the real Kazuko-sama?' asked Junko.

Yoshie shook her head.

"I don't know. She's on the run from Korone who was being controlled by Zero."

"If Kazuko-sama is killed, 2V is the empress? Is that what she is after?"

"But Kazuko-sama was really powerful. I don't think she'd be taken out so easily. Is 2V lying now to survive?"

Junko and Yoshie questioned the situation, but no one in the crowd knew of 2V.

"However, the magic all of you used cannot be recovered. The gods most likely died along with Zero. I am announcing now that I shall once more stand at the center of the empire. I swear I shall bring back magic and I shall directly govern as empress until the gods of the temples have been revived! Please help me rebuild our empire!" announced 2V loudly.

"She can't do that. The imperial constitution says…"

Yoshie began a legitimate argument, but her small voice was drowned out by the overwhelming cries of the crowd.

"Long live Kazuko-sama! Long live Kazuko-sama!"

Their voices piled atop one another and spread out around the temple.

The people were supporting “Kazuko’s” declaration of a dictatorship. They were passionately supporting it.

“Wh-what are they thinking? Until now, the people had believed in the gods and made their own decisions in life,” said Junko blankly.

“It might be specifically because they believed in the gods. They’ve sensed how weak the system that relies on the gods is. At the very least, they now know Zero was the first demon king. In other words, they’ve given up on the priests,” said Yoshie.

“But it was the priests that actually fought back. These people would not have done anything to fight the control over them if Brave had not called out to them.”

“That’s how it works with groups. We’re the same. There have been times when we should’ve said something but didn’t. And we’ve believed in stupid things,” said Yoshie with a nod.

"But once they know the truth…it will all work out, right?" asked Junko with a pale expression.

No one could answer her.

Only the cheering for Kazuko could be heard.

Meanwhile, 2V felt true joy and waves of satisfaction over accomplishing her goal.

"How about that, Zero? This is what people are! I've proven that people are insane! They stood up to escape oppression, but now they're shedding tears of joy and begging me to be their oppressor!" she said quietly to Zero.

"But that will not last long. They will eventually come for your head. And then they will seek a new ruler. That is how I determined humans are insane," said Zero calmly.

"I agree with you there, but I wanted to bet everything on it and prove it myself. I wanted to laugh at the stupidity of every imperial citizen."

"Did you devote your life to that because you are one of those stupid citizens?"

"You can think of it that way. Either way, only death awaits me after doing something like this. But I've set up some countermeasures to live as long as I can. …Now, let 's end this world while I'm still drunk on joy. Zero, release your power now."

"This is why I obeyed you. I have been waiting for this ."

"Here it comes!" cried Keisu as her ears and hair twitched like an animal's ears.

"Here comes what?"

"Zero. I sense Zero awakening."

Keisu looked around, but there was of course nothing there.

"2V is using magic. She must be causing his awakening," said Yoshie as she looked toward 2V through her goggles.

She could see the flow of mana with them.

"Then if we defeat 2V…!"

Junko looked up into the sky where Hiroshi was.

"Please!"

Yuuko clasped her hands up toward the sky.

But Hiroshi was slowly descending.

—I'm out of energy… And the field preventing me from transferring more is still active… This was a trap!

Hiroshi clenched his teeth.

He had of course recognized 2V and he knew he had to defeat her.

But…

—Could I kill 2V even if I had the energy?

He was both regretful and thankful that he was out of energy.

Most likely, he would not have been able to do anything. The people were still applauding in their direction. There was no way he could kill their empress before their eyes.

He would be killing *Kazuko* who the people loved and supported. He did not fear the act itself. What he feared were the angry cries of the people and the never-ending talking behind his back. Even if it was his duty to do so, he would have hesitated.

—This means Zero is still alive. What is going to happen!

"It's no good. I think he's out of energy," said Yuuko as she looked up in the sky.

"What will happen if Zero awakens?" asked Junko again.

"Everyone who has been baptized will have their ability to think taken by that system," answered Keisu.

"But then it's all over!" cried Junko.

Ignorant of this, the people continued to give cries of joy. Most likely, those cries would remain unchanged once Zero awakened. 2V would use Zero's power to have them worship her.

"Keisu, please do something!"

Yoshie shook Keisu, but the small L'Isle-Adam merely tilted her head and could not think of anything.

"Now this empire is forever mine!" cried 2V.

She spoke loudly enough for the people to here.

She received passionate shouts in response.

"Praise this empire which will continue for a millennium!" shouted 2V.

Suddenly, dark clouds arrived.

"Clouds?"

Shadows fell over the crowd. The people looked up into the sky and saw ominous dark clouds hanging over the palace.

"Why are they so isolated?"

"What is going on?"

The crowd began muttering.

Thunder roared. It was loud enough to drown out the people's voices.

Voices of fear now came from the people.

No rain fell. The clouds produced only repeated lightning and thunder.

"What?"

2V looked up.

They had yet to find Kazuko, but there was no sign of her having entered the palace. The priests had made it inside, but they could not use magic and were having trouble with the combat machines 2V had given permission to kill. That left only one option.

"The demon king."

He was floating.

His silhouette was visible in the flashes of lightning.

The screaming crowd grew silent.

A male form covered in a dark glow stood in midair. If the light surrounding him had been white and his expression had been filled with kindness, everyone would have thought he was a saint. However, he was the polar opposite of that.

Black glowing wings of light grew from his back.

His body was wrapped in bulging muscles that gave him an ominous appearance.

His face contained a brutal smile and fangs were visible within his mouth.

His eyes glowed a brilliant red.

"Foolish people who wish to obey this empress, if you can regain your lost freedom in obeying, then do so. But if you wish for freedom and for power, then I shall give it to you," said the demon king.

He spread his arms wide and the people began to mutter amongst themselves once more.

"My magic power…"

"It's returned…"

"Thank goodness," said Junko as she looked up in the sky.

"Yeah, I can use mana again."

Yoshie tried gently wrapping mana around her fingertip and the fingertip did indeed glow.

"I wasn't talking about our magic," said Junko as she trembled and rubbed her face.

"I know. He's back. But he certainly looks different."

Yoshie grinned bitterly.

Yuuko trembled in fear when she saw Akuto, so Junko placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Don't worry. He hasn't changed on the inside. I can tell from what he said. He intends to take it all onto himself."

"Take it all onto himself?"

"That's right. He will…end it all," said Junko.

In that instant, lightning shot down toward the terrace on which 2V stood.

With a tremendous explosion, half the palace terrace was blown away without a trace.

2V's body fell before everyone's eyes as a black carbonized mass.

After a few seconds of silence, screams of fear and anger rose from the people who had grasped what had happened. Those screams gradually spread throughout the palace yard.

But the demon king only laughed loudly and spoke.

"You may have defeated Zero, who I sent ahead of me, but he succeeded in killing the gods. Why do you think that is? It was so I could give everyone the power of magic equally. And why did I kill your empress? It was to destroy the current world order. Now, do you wish to

serve someone? Or do you wish to live for yourself? The time has come to choose where this world is headed. This is the final war and I am this world's last demon king."

Chapter 5: The Bloody Empress

2V walked through an unknown passageway behind the palace.

It connected to the secret room she had once lived in.

No one knew of its existence anymore. It had been quite a long time since 2V had been there.

2V was alive.

“It was very cautious of you to use a doll resembling your real self even then,” said Zero.

Zero now had a L’Isle-Adam body. That body had an inhumanly beautiful face from which all humanity had been eliminated.

“Didn’t I tell you I was prepared? And it is true that I am willing to have my life come to an end here. I will live as a recluse now, so you can do as you wish. That demon king managed to interfere with your power, but you intend to oppose him, don’t you? I will watch as you do.”

Akuto seemed to have the ability to oppose Zero's seal on the gods' power. That may have been why they were both known as a demon king.

Once their conversation was complete, Zero continued further into the palace.

2V headed in the opposite direction, but someone stood in her path.

"Aren't you forgetting about someone?"

2V looked up in surprise.

A girl wearing a stylish hat stood there.

"Lily Shiraishi, right?" said 2V lightly.

"That's right. I figured there was an escape route no one knew about, so I made a thorough search of the palace. That's what I've been doing since this attack began. After all, I knew you would never let anyone capture you." Lily grabbed the brim of her hat and reversed it. "I can finally use magic again, so I'm gonna go all out from the beginning!"

Lily immediately charged forward.

"Tch!"

2V created several mana spheres around herself and moved her hands to control them. This was the magic of the imperial family that Kazuko had used.

"You have multiple mana attacks that can cause physical blows, but I just have to throw enough punches to outnumber them!"

Lily threw countless punches forward. 2V guided the mana spheres, but Lily's extended fists struck each and every one. The special mana spheres dealt physical blows even while stationary, so this was a comparison of strength.

"Ohhhhhh!"

Lily's fists were deflected by the mana spheres, but she still managed to send in a great number of blows. For each sphere, she sent in ten blows. It was a tremendous number.

And 2V began to be pushed back.

"Kh…!"

2V's magic power lost to Lily. The mana spheres vanished and the countless fists slammed into her slender body.

"Doraaaah!"

Lily swung her fists and slammed 2V into a wall.

2V groaned while pinned to the wall.

"Gh…!"

"Hah. I won't kill you, so don't worry. If I don't have proof of your identity, I can't bring back the previous system. Despite my grudge, it would be better if I left you alive. Killing you would essentially accomplish your goal."

Lily extended an arm with magic power and lifted 2V up by the collar. From 2V's expression, one would have thought Lily had said she would kill her.

"Stop. Please stop."

"You've vaguely realized it, haven't you? People aren't as stupid as you think they are. If I reveal the truth, they'll be able to make an intelligent decision. I won't let you escape into death to avoid seeing something you'd rather not."

Lily gave a cruel smile.

And at that moment, a dull noise rang from 2V's body. Lily felt the impact through her hand.

"Wha-…?"

Lily's eyes opened wide.

A glowing sword was stabbed through 2V's body.

"Ghah!" groaned 2V as she coughed up blood.

"What…?"

The glowing sword had flown in from the side.

And after it pierced 2V's body, it disappeared as if turning to dust. It had been formed from mana. Not many magicians could maintain that much power while sending mana long distance in a non spherical form.

Lily was shocked when she turned toward where the sword had come from.

Kazuko walked elegantly toward her.

"Kazuko-sama…"

"Don't you feel sorry for her? She was asking for death herself. She has been hiding in the darkness without directly speaking with anyone for so long, so we need to at least give her a nice dream in the very end."

Kazuko walked over to 2V.

2V was still breathing.

"D-damn you…" groaned 2V.

Kazuko kissed her twin sister.

The mouth and cheek of Kazuko's beautiful face were stained with blood.

But Kazuko continued smiling and looked on 2V with a kind expression.

"You poor thing. You wanted to be like me, didn't you ? Did you gain your wish in the end? If so, I will kill you before that nice dream comes to an end."

Kazuko fired a mana sword into 2V from close range.

2V convulsed.

"A-are you sure you should do this?" asked Lily.

Kazuko's entire body was stained with blood and she jabbed her right hand inside the wound her mana sword had left in 2V's stomach. She moved her hand around a bit, found the heart, and pulled it from 2V's body.

"K-Kazuko…-sama…"

Lily was left speechless.

Kazuko tilted her head slightly as if to say she was doing nothing out of the ordinary. She then held the heart in both hands and began to eat it with perfect etiquette.

"Oh, it is quite like a large dried plum."

"Wh-why?"

Kazuko smiled gently as Lily backed away.

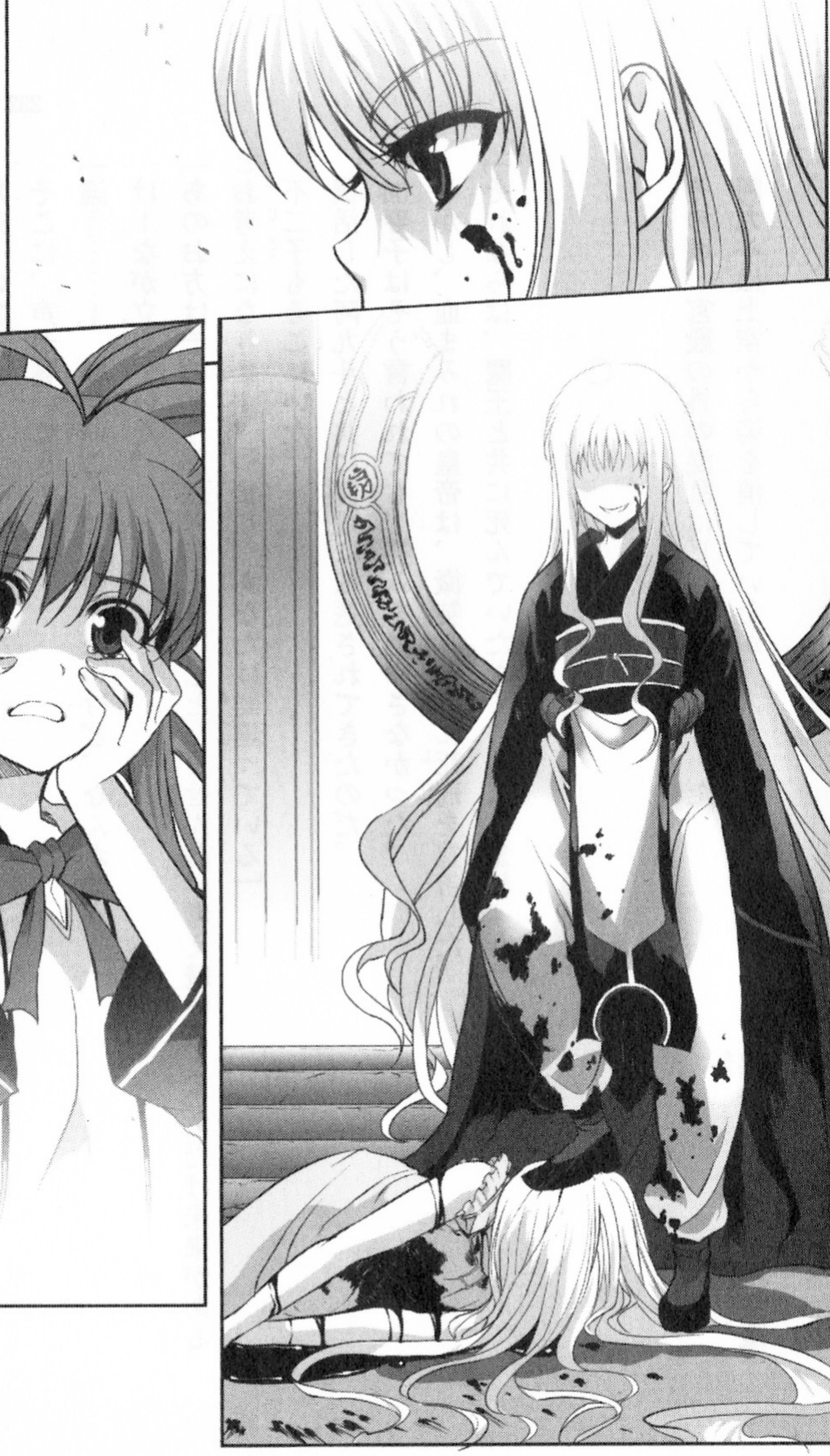
"I have taken in her mana wavelength. The power that was meant for me ended up with her. It is called Yata no Kagami and it allows one to transfer their consciousness into L'Isle-Adams and dolls."

"And eating that means…"

Sweat flowed down Lily's brow.

"Yes. By taking that power, I plan to take responsibility for what she has done. Zero is working in the name of the empress. For the first time in thousands of years, it is time to bring back the rule of an emperor," announced Kazuko.

"What…?"



Lily did not know what to say.

"With Zero and the demon king working for the empress, magic has been unified. Everyone can live in a happy society ruled by the empress," said Kazuko.

But another voice cut in.

"No! I don't know the details, but that's wrong!"

Keena stood there.

"He will not allow you to bring an end to all thought like that. He thinks that the future lies in continuing to think. In other words, you are wrong."

Fujiko was there too.

They had been transferred to the palace along with Akuto.

Despite the protests, Kazuko's smile remained.

But as she smiled, the bloody empress announced an execution.

"In that case, you will have to die along with the demon king."

The confusion outside the temple reached its peak.

Akuto had disappeared from the sky, but the people were fleeing in fear. Some were using their resurrected flight magic or the flying cars that could be used once more.

Among them, Yoshie, Junko, and Keisu headed for the palace. With her magic back, Junko leaped from wall to wall while holding Yoshie. Keisu followed behind.

Yuuko had stayed with Hiroshi once he descended. His energy supply had apparently returned, so he could fly away with her.

"So what was that?" asked Yoshie.

She referred to Akuto's actions. Yoshie had not known him for long, so she could not figure out why he had done what he did.

"He intentionally made everyone hate him. That is the kind of guy he is," explained Junko.

"Why would he do that? Is there any advantage to it?"

"That is just who he is. He is trying to save everyone by carrying all the negative legacy himself. I could tell from the way he tried to act evil. He plans to bring an end to these wars over the demon king once and for all."

Junko's words were passionate and her usual liveliness had returned to her eyes.

"So he's going to defeat Zero and oppose the empress? Fwoh! I had guessed some of it, but this is getting interesting!"

Yoshie smiled and looked up at Junko's face as she carried her.

"What is it?" asked Junko when she noticed.

Yoshie grinned.

"I just realized how much you've fallen for Akuto-kun. It's gonna be tough being interested in someone like that, y'know?"

"I-idiot! This is not the time for that!"

"Fine, fine. Now, let's go throw away our lives for an interesting guy."

Yoshie laughed.

"So 2V has finally died."

On a road with a good distance from the center of the capital, Kento smoked a pipe while resting his elbows on the roof of a parked ground car. He sighed as he sensed a disturbance in the mana he was tracing.

"The limiter the gods placed on magic has been removed. The age has come where people can use magic with no thought to morality. Now, which side should I join?"

Kento climbed inside the car with the pipe still in his mouth.

"Bouichirou had to have considered this as a possibility. He left behind Zero's body and that suit, but I need to search for something else that he left behind."

Kento went by the codename USD and he was the man who had once been called the strongest magician.

Afterword

Thank you as always. This is Mizuki Shoutarou.

We are already at Volume 8. I'm not sure if this is part 2 of the story or the beginning of a new story, but here it is. If you have yet to read Volume 7, you should go ahead and do that.

This was another development that even I found unexpected. The characters are really starting to drag me around. I have a feeling the next volume will be really exciting.

And I can also inform you of an upcoming anime adaptation.

As those of you who bought this book new saw on the advertisement, it will begin airing on Chiba TV and other UHF stations starting in April. As you know, UHF stations are where "anything goes", so you can expect it to be quite excessive.

The main staff has Watanabe Takashi-sama as the director, Kobayashi Toshimitsu-sama as the main

character designer and chief animation director, Yoshioka Takao-sama as story editor and scriptwriter, and Akahoshi Masanao-sama as scriptwriter! It's a lineup of veterans, so I can only say I'm really excited. If I had to explain why I'm excited, I would say I'm looking forward to "a true prank of adults". I've met all of them and spoken with them, but I could sense something shining in their casual comments. I know they're going to betray my expectations in the best possible way! Please look forward to it. I'll be looking forward to it the most.

Of course, the drama CD from Beatniks Inc. is on sale. The voice actors will change for the anime version, but just think of it like the double cast you often see in stage performances. That can make for a good habit.

Also, Itou Souichi-san's manga version is running in Champion RED. I heard him say he's going to charge forward with it, so I believe he's going to keep going for quite a while. It's been really amazing lately.

And lastly, my thanks…except I'm out of space. I give my thanks to everyone involved and to the readers who have supported me. I hope you continue reading from here on. There's still a lot to enjoy!